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## Prologue

There's a theory called the butterfly effect. "If a butterfly flaps its wings in Beijing today, there'll be a storm in New York next month," is how it goes. It's similar to the saying "when the wind blows, the barrel makers profit," except that there is a clear path between the wind blowing and the barrel makers profiting. With the butterfly effect, it's unknown why the butterfly in Beijing is causing a storm so far away. But maybe that's how society works. Who did you meet? Where? A butterfly I passed might be flapping its wings, causing a storm somewhere else without me knowing. Because humans can't live alone. No matter how lonely you feel, your life is connected to someone else's somewhere.

Right, people are connected. Just like blood vessels. Both the people I've met, and the strangers I didn't. Each and every one of those lives moves my heart. If human bonds are blood vessels, what are bones? Sturdy yet fragile, supporting people from the inside- maybe love? Shitara-sensei said that bones are the truth. Sakurako-san said bones are everything to her. To me, bones are love. The core of the body, supporting people so they can move.

In the past, I thought love was something more pure and beautiful. But I didn't know anything back then. I thought that Kiyomi-san, a woman living in an apartment my mom manages, was like a saint. I didn't know anything. I was still a child. How does someone become an adult? I want to know how to speed up the clock.

I'm horribly stressed after Yoshimi-san half-forced me into her car. I should have been more careful. I can't believe I let my guard down like that. Yoshimi-san looks like she's worrying over something in the driver's seat. Is she one of Hanabusa's phantoms? Or is she like me, and got caught up in the situation? Probably the latter. Her hands trembling as she grips the steering wheel is proof. That's the reason why I'm scared. I don't know what she'll do in her

overwhelmed state. After having almost died, her resolve is stronger than ever. Ah… Was saving Yoshimi-san really the right choice? At that moment, my hands and my whole body were her heart.

I don't really understand life. What path am I following? Where is the wind taking me? I have no idea. And whose wind is pushing me around? The scar from when I was stabbed exactly one year ago starts to ache. The city is decorated in red for Christmas, but it just looks like the colour of blood to me.

## First Bone: Yuriko Kougami's Case

### Part 1

In America and Europe, Christmas is a day to spend with your family, but in Japan it's a day to spend with friends or a lover. It's a day to spend with the person you love the most. The first person that comes to mind when I think of who I want to celebrate it with is Ranka. On the Sunday before Christmas, my dad laughs and calls me a kid when I tell them that I'm going to have a Christmas party with some of my girl friends.

My mom forces a smile and says, "your dad is a bit old-fashioned, isn't he?"

She's right. It doesn't matter who you celebrate it with, even if you don't have a significant other. Even when I grow up, I want to cherish Ranka and my other friends. It would be nice if Tatewaki-kun and Sakurako-san were among those "friends," too. As I listen to my mom and dad talk to each other, I notice that my mouth is twisted into a smile even though I'm not having fun.

Smiling is my special skill. It always has been. Even if something isn't funny at all, I can still laugh. As I've grown up, I've gotten better at laughing, but I've forgotten what it feels like to find something "funny." But when I'm with Ranka, I find myself laughing so hard that my stomach hurts. True happiness comes from having someone who makes you laugh naturally. I'm grateful to Tatewaki-

kun and Sakurako-san for allowing me to become true friends with Ranka.

Ranka has something to do in the morning, so we've promised to meet up in the afternoon. We've planned to make no-bake cheesecake, then make zangi and hand rolled sushi for dinner, and have a sleepover together.

Since I don't have any plans for the morning, I figure that I should go buy Tatewaki-kun and Sakurako-san Christmas presents. As I prepare to head out, my phone rings. Who could it be? I take a peek at my phone. I wouldn't be surprised by anyone except for the one person who is calling me - Isozaki-sensei.

"Are you free right now?" Is the first thing he says to me.

"Not really, but… Did something happen?"

"I was invited to go to a Christmas party at noon, but I don't want to go alone."

"…So why call me?"

Surely he has other people he could ask, right?

"Kujou-san and Shoutarou already have plans, and Ume-san says that her back hurts."

He even asked her… I stop pulling up my tights.

"It sounds like you were invited by someone close to Sakurako-san, then?"

"Right. Chiyoda-san, a relative of Sakurako-san's fiance."

I've met her before. It was at a party at the Kujou house. She was beautiful. I'm getting curious about why she invited Isozaki-sensei.

"Why did she invite you, then?"

"Apparently she bought a new house in the suburbs, so she's holding a Christmas party to show it off. Chiyoda-san and I discuss gardening-related matters with each other. 100% of our conversations are about plants, though."

That explains why Isozaki-sensei was invited, and why he invited me. He has a lot to talk about when it's just about flowers, but he feels uncomfortable going to the party alone, so he invited Sakurako-san and the others but they can't go.

“I’ll pick you up. Ran can come, too. You’re good at making small talk and smiling politely, right?”

“Seriously…?”

It sounds bad when he puts it like that, but the most frustrating part is that I can’t deny it. Besides, I’d feel bad for Shouko-san if she were left alone with Isozaki-sensei. That said, I wonder what they’d talk about besides flowers.

“Fine, but Ranka says she has something to do until evening. If you’re going in the afternoon, only I’ll be able to go.”

“I’ll pick her up later, then. For now, come with me.”

After briefly saying he’s heading over to get me, he arbitrarily hangs up the call. Geez… If it were Tatewaki-kun, he’d probably jump at the chance to eat good food as soon as he heard there was a party, but… it can’t be helped. I contact Ranka.

“That’s fine. I can get Zakiiso to owe me one,” she replies.

Geez. But what should I wear on such short notice? Shouko-san is a beautiful person. I was about to go shopping by the station in some jeans and a hoodie, but now I have no choice but to turn my closet inside out. I don’t have a dress or anything, and it’s not a very formal party, but I should at least wear a skirt. After much deliberation, I decide on a white and green checkered, knit, mid length skirt. I also pick out a cute red coat with white fur, but I wonder if I’m going overboard with the Christmas colours? Maybe I should at least change the skirt. Will my ankles get cold with a mid length one? It would be better if it were a little longer… As I’m frowning in front of the mirror, Isozaki-sensei arrives.

I quickly grab my bag, deciding to go with this skirt after all. Isozaki-sensei laughs slightly when he sees me.

“…What?”

“You look like a Christmas tree.”

“If that’s how you're going to be, I’ll just stay home,” I reply in annoyance.

“I don’t really care, though,” he says.

That’s because he only ever thinks about himself. I’m fully aware that I have no fashion sense. I usually try to use magazines as a reference to coordinate my outfits, but when I have to choose

on my own, I lose all my confidence. I accidentally let it slip out that I wish I could be fashionable like Ranka is. Sensei tilts his head.

"I don't think it would be a good idea to try to copy Ranka's outfits," he says. "Why not just wear whatever you want?"

He's wearing a hoodie and jeans.

"…"

Then I wouldn't have to try so hard, I guess. Lately, I've realized that there are a lot of things I'm not good at. I feel irritated by my reflection in the glass.

On the way to Shouko-san's new house, we stop by the cake shop that Sensei and Sakurako-san love. His cute little car drives us through a rural area along the Ushishubetsu river just outside Nagayama. Eventually, we arrive at a single storey house with a somewhat retro exterior. It suddenly started to snow this evening, but it looks like they've gotten a lot more over here.

He parks the car in a small parking spot. We walk along a narrow path through the snow to get to the entrance. My tights are a bit wet now, and the snow got into my short boots, so my ankles are cold.

"Welcome! I'm so glad you came."

Shouko-san greets us as soon as we ring the doorbell. She looks so elegant in her pale-beige knit dress that I feel embarrassed about my own clothes.

"Sorry, the room isn't warmed up yet. I plan on renovating it soon."

When I step into the hallway, the floor creaks, and it smells old and damp. It reminds me of my grandma's house. It smells like an empty house, just like her's…

"This house used to be managed by Kouji's - my relative's son's father, but it's been empty ever since he passed away. It's a nice house with a big garden, so I figured why not use it? So I got it as an early Christmas present," Shouko-san says as she invites us into the living room where a wood stove is burning bright red.

Even if it's old, getting a whole house as a Christmas present… The difference in scale between us is dizzying.

"…But wouldn't it be quicker to rebuild the house, rather than renovate it?" Isozaki-sensei asks.

"That's true, but… This house used to be owned by my grandfather's younger brother, Ryuusei Toudou, who was a painter. There's still traces of paint left on the walls and floors in different spots, so it'd be a shame to just get rid of all that. Besides, I also like the atmosphere," Shouko-san laughs. "I'm going to sell my house in Asahikawa and move into my apartment in Sapporo, then use this place as a vacation house mostly."

I've never heard the name Ryuusei Toudou before, but when I look him up on my phone, I find out he's quite famous. His works are displayed in many public facilities not only in the city, but across Hokkaido. I've even seen some of them before. His students came and went, but after Toudou-sensei passed away, the remaining students gradually left. A relative who likes art took over the business, Shouko-san tells us as she pours some tea.

When I look over at Isozaki-sensei, I see that rather than listen to our conversation, he's caring for some cyclamen flowers on a table. As soon as I notice him, I make a bitter smile. Shouko-san doesn't mind, though, and nods with a wide smile at him.

"Anyway, the interior aside, I'd still like to maintain the garden, even if it's just a vacation home. I thought about hiring a gardener to take care of it… But then I thought it'd be nice if Isozaki-kun could do as he likes with it."

"…"

It's rare to see Isozaki-sensei with the blank, puzzled look he's giving Shouko-san right now.

"Of course I'll pay for the expenditures, as well as pay you for your time. And when I'm not here, you can use the villa as you'd like. If you can't keep up with the maintenance I can hire more people, but I'd love to see what you design."

Even I can understand what an incredible offer that is. To be able to do whatever he wants with the garden without worrying about the money, and to even be paid for it… I don't think there could be

anything better for someone who loves flowers as much as Isozaki-sensei.

"…Those terms sound too good, I'm scared."

But this is Isozaki-sensei. He speaks calmly, and remembers to stay skeptical despite his happiness.

"The terms are good for me, too. I'm sure Isozaki-kun won't bring women over or do anything bad. You'll put your whole heart and soul into making the garden beautiful, right?"

She's right. There's no way Sensei would be interested in women.

I nod at Shouko-san.

"Right?" She says happily, waiting for Sensei's answer. "Well, you can think it over-"

"I'll do it."

"Oh?"

"Please let me." Isozaki-sensei leans forward and interrupts Shouko-san.

Her cheeks are a bit red, and I don't think it's from the wood stove.

"Then we have a deal. You won't be able to start working on it until after the snow melts, so just spend the winter thinking over your plans to make me a beautiful garden," Shouko-san says as she hands Isozaki-sensei some tea.

He has a slightly sulky look on his face.

Part 2

"Winter will pass by in the blink of an eye. Do you have any requests, Chiyoda-san?" Isozaki-sensei says after clearing his throat.

Although he seems elegant, and there's something unfathomable about him… He's not all that he appears to be. When faced with someone as mysterious as Shouko-san, even Sensei seems to get nervous. Even Sakurako-san doesn't make him panic like this…

‘She’s incredible,’ I think as I look at Shouko-san through the steam rising off my tea.

After smiling at Sensei and I, she gestures around the room and says, “you see… Since this is a one-storey house with a lot of rooms, I was wondering if you could make a spring room, a summer room, and so on. The garden visible from each room can be themed after a season. Wouldn’t it be lovely to be able to sleep in a room with a garden in full bloom, no matter what time of year it is?”

Her expression seems to say, “don’t you think so, Yuriko-chan?” So I nod my head.

I almost feel dizzy. It sounds almost too nice.

“The garden will need to be in 3 sections, then?”

“It would be nice to have 2 types of spring garden. There are beautiful gardens with plum blossoms, cherry blossoms, azaleas, and weeping forsythia; but there’s also lovely gardens with spring ephemerals like trilliums and corydalis. They seem to like growing in a clump together, so I’d like them in the same corner.”

Spring ephemerals? I look to Isozaki-sensei upon hearing Shouko-san say those unfamiliar words.

“They’re flowers that bloom all at once when the snow melts, like pheasant’s eye. People call them spring fairies, since they bloom then wither before spring truly arrives.”

Shouko-san tells me that “spring ephemeral” means something that’s fleeting in the springtime. Spring fairies that grow and flower once the snow thaws, then vanish when summer arrives and lay in the earth, waiting for the next spring.

“It’s not just flowers, but insects that appear in early spring are also called the same thing. Snow apollos, for example. They hatch, feed on young corydalis leaves, then disappear with the arrival of summer.”

Snow apollo - I tilt my head curiously at the familiar sounding name. Where could I have heard it… Before I can remember, I’m told it’s time to eat, and forget about it. It feels like it was important, though. But that just shows how delicious the lunch Shouko-san made is.

It's roast turkey from the city of Takinoue, which is even further North than Asahikawa. The turkey is in a bagel, forming a sandwich. There's also indescribably beautiful pink roast beef, stuffed in a baguette like rose petals. It's my first time eating turkey. The smell is a bit different from chicken, and it tastes quite bland and dry on its own, but it goes surprisingly well with the sweet and sour cranberry sauce. Together, it tastes sweet, sour, and salty, with a slight fragrance of rosemary. I've never tasted something like it before, but it's delicious. Roast beef can be dry if it isn't cooked right, but this is juicy with a nice peppery smell. There's a generous amount of wasabi, which stings my nose. Coupled with the freshly baked, crunchy baguette, I feel happier with each bite.

"It's too bad Tatewaki-kun couldn't come. He would have loved this."

Even Sensei is eagerly gobbling it down. I truly pity Tatewaki-kun's misfortune. I'm 100% sure he would have loved these delicious sandwiches.

"I made a lot of extra just for him, so I'm going to take some to him later. I told Sakurako that she and Shou-chan were welcome to come over, but I forgot to tell Shou-chan directly. Sakurako should have told him in advance," Shouko-san says with a bitter smile.

She adds that she bought a whole turkey, so she wanted everyone to enjoy it, even if her main goal was to talk to Isozaki-sensei. I'm sure that Sensei will make a beautiful garden. I wish I had a hobby like that, too. Everyone would expect a lot from me, though.

"Do you really have that many rooms here?" Sensei asks after we eat some of the salad, fruit, and tart cake that he brought for Shouko-san.

"Yes. Apparently in the past, there used to be disciples who lived here and took care of everyone."

I've heard of students called shosei who do chores, but I wonder if artists called them something else? Shouko-san gets out of her chair and offers to show us around. It looks like it's snowing

outside, but Sensei wants to check it out. They both talk about the garden the whole time, so I feel like I didn't really need to come. I walk a few paces behind them. They give off the same dazzling aura as when Sakurako-san and Tatewaki-kun talk excitedly about bones.

"Sorry that it's still kind of a mess. This is only my third time coming here."

Her first time was when she was asked if she wanted the house, and the second was when she decided to take it. She says that she wants to spend the winter organizing and renovating it so that she can have company over by summer.

We're shown the room where the top disciple would stay. It seems to mainly be a storage room for artwork, though.

"This isn't Ryuusei's art, though. It's all work done by his pupils."

Shouko-san says she'd like to return all the pictures to the pupils and their families, but most of the works don't say who made them. When the door creaks open, the cold, dusty air rushes out. Upon opening the curtains in the dimly lit room, I see countless canvases haphazardly piled up.

"If this room was being used as storage, it must face North, right?" Sensei says as he looks out the window while I'm distracted by the paintings.

"Why? Because it's cold?"

"No, just because there's less light. Pictures and books are easily damaged by the sun."

"Oh, I see… Does that pose a problem for the garden?"

Little light means it'll be hard for plants to grow, right?

"It's no problem. I'll just make a shade garden. In fact, it'll make a nice place to rest during the hottest part of the day in summer. Fortunately, there's nothing blocking the light that is coming in," Sensei says happily as he gazes at the scenery out the window.

All I see is a fluffy, white snowscape, but I'm sure he's looking at a beautiful garden.

"A Japanese-style garden covered in moss might be nice. Hydrangeas are gorgeous. The classics are good, but maybe I should try a galaxy, kaleidoscope, or temari-temari cultivar?"

“In that case, maybe you could try using a washbasin, like at Yanagitankannon in Kyoto. Aren’t the hydrangeas in the basin so dreamy and beautiful?”

“That’s true. The graceful, calming flowers are nice, but there’s so many eye-catching types of temari now—“

The two of them start talking enthusiastically, so I turn my attention to the stacks of canvases. They’re mostly landscapes, animals, and inanimate objects. It reminds me of my grandpa. Before he got dementia, he’d go out with my grandma and paint pictures of all sorts of places. They’re different from photographs. You can sense the human heart and warmth behind each brushstroke.

I get to a corner with paintings of flowers. I pick up a painting of a large sunflower backed by a clear sky, typical of Asahikawa. Just underneath it is a picture of a hydrangea. Hydrangeas sure are pretty. Back when I was in elementary school, my grandparents took me to look at the flowers at a shrine during summer vacation. I think it was near Lake Touya, maybe in Date city.

“…”

I pick up the hydrangea picture. There are black butterflies fluttering around the red and purple flowers.

“…Ah.”

For some reason, I feel like I’ve seen this garden before, but there are ominous, pitch black swallowtail butterflies tearing at the flowers…

“Oh!”

I flinch when I hear Shouko-san’s voice behind me.

“I-I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have touched it…”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” She shakes her head and says that she was actually looking for this painting. “I was looking for it all this time… And it was right here,” Shouko-san says with relief while she looks intently at the black butterflies.

“Is it important?”

“Yes… This actually belongs to Sakurako.”

“It’s Kujou-san’s? She doesn’t seem like the type to care about a painting.” Sensei shrugs.

“This was painted by her aunt,” Shouko-san says with a bitter smile.

“Her aunt was named Kaoruko Kujou, but worked under the pen name Agiku-san. This piece in particular was one of her masterpieces. She won the newcomer award from the Japanese Art Society with it. If she hadn't passed away young, she definitely would have become one of Hokkaido’s best artists.”

I quietly ask, “but if it’s so important, then why is it here?”

“She used to study under Ryuusei, even though it was only for a little while. Maybe that’s why?”

“Only for a little while?” Sensei asks.

“Yes… She was a beautiful woman, but she was odd. She didn’t seem to get along with Ryuusei. Maybe she was just so talented that she got on everyone’s nerves,” Shouko-san mutters, wondering if she had actually been expelled or not.

“When you say odd… Do you mean like Sakurako-san?”

“Yes, if you wait a minute… It’s probably in the next room over.”

Shouko-san heads into the adjacent room. After a while, she comes back with a stack of photos in her hand and says, “here, this is it.”

I take a look at the slightly old pictures. I think it’s a group photo of Ryuusei-sensei and his students? There are a bunch of young artists standing with an old man. Among them, there’s one particular woman who stands out. Strangely, the black butterfly in the painting seems to overlap with her figure.

“…She’s beautiful.”

She’s so beautiful that I can’t help but say it out loud. Her long, straight, black hair, her slender limbs, and her deep, dark gaze come through even in the old photo. I instantly recognize that she’s Agiku-san. Sakurako-san’s mom’s older sister.

“This one is even better.”

Shouko-san holds out one of the pictures. It shows Agiku-san smiling boldly, wearing a men’s kimono without a hakama.

“She looks just like Kujou-san,” Isozaki-sensei says.

Both her appearance and her aura resemble Sakurako-san.

“Yeah, but it’s more accurate to say Sakurako looks like her… I think it’s more about their vibe than their appearance. Osawa-san says that they had similar personalities. Osawa-san was always closer with Kaoruko-san than she was with Sakurako’s mother, which is why she finds Sakurako so endearing.”

“Given her personality, her family must have gone through a lot of hardships,” Sensei says rudely.

“But you said she died young… Did she die soon after this?”

“…”

Shouko-san bites her lower lip. She looks like she’s hesitant to answer my question. I realize that it was impolite of me to ask.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have…”

“No… I was just worried about if it’s okay to talk about or not. If you’re really curious, you could look it up online. Agiku-san seemed to have a bright future ahead of her,” Shouko-san starts to say with a strained voice and a scowl on her face.

She gently pets the photo with her fingertip. Right where Agiku-san’s smile is.

“…The Kujou family hasn’t given birth to a boy for generations,” Shouko-san says after a moment of silence. “Sakurako’s father and grandfather were both adopted into the family. The Shitara family that her father was from only ever had boys. Sakurako’s grandfather tried to force Kaoruko-san into an arranged marriage, but Kaoruko-san was strongly opposed to it.”

I can imagine that Sakurako-san’s family was worried about having an heir, but I also think that having your parents choose who you marry is too old fashioned. Apparently Agiku-san was already in love with someone else. It’s a bit hard to imagine because of how similar she looks to Sakurako-san in the photo, but she rejected who her family wanted her to marry in the most tragic way. On the day of the engagement ceremony, Agiku-san and one of the other young painters studying under Ryuusei committed suicide together by jumping into the river. Fortunately the man was rescued and survived, but Agiku-san’s body was never found. In the end, her younger sister got married instead, and gave birth to Sakurako-san.

“Then finally, at long last, a boy was born. Time stopped for the Kujou family on the day that Sou-chan died,” Shouko-san says, sounding sad and lonely.

From what I’ve heard from Tatewaki-kun, Sakurako-san, and Gran, Sakurako-san didn’t get along with her mother very well. I’ve always felt bad for Sakurako-san because of that. Being in pain doesn’t give you the right to hurt someone else. But after the death of her sister and child, I think her mother was just so badly wounded by all the misfortune…

Families can be strange. Everyone always thinks theirs is normal. They should be normal. They look normal from the outside. Yet they have secrets and anguish hidden deep inside. All of them do. Each and every family. The thick roots of those secrets and sorrows spread beneath the ground. There they wait quietly until the next spring, just like spring ephemerals.

I spend a while looking around at the paintings and photos next to the somber Shouko-san. I notice that Isozaki-sensei is off on his own, looking disinterestedly at the pictures of flowers. Eventually, he picks up a picture from the corner of the room that has a different frame from the others.

“…This painting…”

His expression suddenly stiffens, like he’s surprised by something.

“What’s up? Do you like that one?”

“No, it’s just… it felt familiar to me.”

When he looks up from the painting, his face is pale, like all the blood has drained out of it.

“It’s familiar? I wonder who painted it…” Shouko-san reaches for the picture while saying she doesn’t know all of the different students’ art styles.

However, Isozaki-sensei doesn’t hand it over right away.

“What’s wrong?” Shouko-san asks, perplexed.

Sensei hesitates for a moment, then looks like he’s prepared himself for the worst as he hands the painting to Shouko-san.

“Do you know who painted this one?”

“This one… It’s not signed, but I don’t think Kaoruko-san made this one… It must have been one of the other students…”

The colours are much darker than any of the other pictures in the room. Just looking at it makes me feel uneasy. It’s all black and brown, almost like it’s monotone sepia. It depicts darkly coloured butterflies and flowers. The flowers are black. They look like some kind of peony, but I’ve never seen a black one. The butterflies swarming around the flowers are dark brown. They look more like moths than butterflies. The patterns on their wings look strange. Each wing has 7 spots of different sizes. Upon close inspection, each dot is a human eye. At first, I think it could just be one weird picture, but then I notice that it seems to be part of a set. There are 3 more paintings with the same touch. The other paintings depict black, withered peonies and swallows.

“…Feelings.”

The words leave my mouth before I can stop them. It’s that poem. From the people who kidnapped me.

Part 3

“This is… A series, isn’t it?”

“Hm? Yes, that’s right.”

“I think they’re based on a poem called ‘Feelings’ but… The last one seems to stray from the poem…”

There’s one with butterflies on the flowers, then the butterflies leaving the withered flowers, then swallows flying by the withered flowers, but… The last one shows a corpse lying on the ground while the swallows peck at it and the butterflies drink its blood.

“ When flowers open, butterflies fill the branches. When the flowers part, the butterflies leave. However, there’s an old swallow’s nest, and though the owner of the land is poor, they return to their nest again. ” I recite the poem.

I have it memorized. It was a message left in the newspaper. But if they were based on the poem, the picture should show that once the flowers (representing wealth) were gone and the master

was poor, only the swallows would be loyal enough to stay with him, unlike the butterflies.

“It’s not wrong, in terms of butterfly behaviour. Butterflies feed on human corpses, not just flowers. This butterfly is probably a Diana treebrown,” Isozaki-sensei says in a slightly shrill voice.

Shouko-san looks at us a bit confused, and tilts her head.

“Ah, this painting… It used to be hanging on the wall, but it’s kind of creepy, right? And with all the eyes, it felt like they were watching… I took it down.”

Felt like they were watching?

“U-um! Where… was it hanging?”

“Hm? It wasn't here, it was in the other building in the back,..” Shouko-san is surprised by how shaken Isozaki-sensei and I are. “I’ll show you there,” she says.

With four paintings in hand, I follow after Shouko-san.

“I don’t think these paintings were done by Ryuusei, but the brushwork is similar. It was probably one of his students that regularly helped him with his paintings.”

Soon, we arrive at a room that’s about 8 tatami mats in size. Unlike the other rooms, the windows are placed quite high up. There’s windows on three of the walls to allow light in, but since they’re so close to the ceiling, there’s only walls at eye-level. The room is indescribably oppressive.

This was Ryuusei-sensei’s work room. The design may protect the paintings from light damage, but it makes it feel so uncomfortable.

“What… is this?”

I find myself standing paralyzed at the entrance of the room as Shouko-san begins hanging the pictures back on the walls. Just one is eerie enough, but having all four up is even worse. But the eyes. Just as Shouko-san said, it feels like they’re all staring right at me. I timidly step through the doorway and look up at the fourth painting, hanging above the door - a butterfly drinking the blood of a corpse - and I’m convinced. It’s staring. There’s no doubt that the butterfly is looking at me— no, not me. It’s looking in this direction. All the butterflies seem to be watching the door.

“The butterflies are all looking at the same spot. Was there… anything on the door? Like another painting, or anything…”

“No, as far as I know, there was nothing there.”

Indeed, the butterflies are staring at the blank door. It feels like there’s some meaning to their gaze, but I don’t know what it is. Looking into the eyes of the butterflies feels unbearable. Additionally, if you look closely at the two largest eyes on the wings, they’re made of many smaller eyes.

A chill runs up my spine. Those paintings are definitely weird. They’re scary, even. When I mention the smaller eyes to the other two, sensei says, “butterflies have compound eyes.”

“Compound eyes…”

“Yes. It’s said that for swallowtail butterflies, males have 18 000 hexagonal ommatidia, while females have 15 000. Supposedly, males have more because they use their sight to search for females.”

If I think about it like that, then maybe the eyes made of smaller eyes aren't so grotesque.

“Then… Is this butterfly male, or female?” I ask.

Sensei crosses his arms and takes a closer look.

“I can’t say for sure, but it looks like there’s some hair in the middle of the hind wings, so it’s probably male-“ Sensei raises his head, like he suddenly noticed something. “Male eyes… Chiyoda-san, do you have some cellophane tape and a permanent marker?”

“Huh?”

“I need a blue and a purple pen.”

“A pen… And tape… Just give me a minute.”

Shouko-san is confused by the sudden request, but she still goes searching through the desk drawers and shelves. She finds a shelf that’s dedicated to stationery, so she asks us to help her look through it. We find some markers, but most of them are dried up. The three of us turn the room upside down, but eventually manage to find exactly what Isozaki-sensei asked for.

“So what do you need this for?” Shouko-san asks with her head tilted.

I'm wondering the same thing. Sensei sits down on an old, creaky stool in front of the work desk, then takes out his phone. He puts the tape on the light of his phone, and colours it blue. Then he adds another layer of tape, and colours it purple.

"Sensei…? What are you doing?"

"Are there blinds in here? Can you lower them?" He says, pointing at the window.

"Yes, if you pull this string, the blinds will close…"

Before she can finish her explanation, he's already pulling the cord to block out all the light in the room. Shouko-san and I look at each other, then close the blinds on the other windows. The blinds are old and damaged, so thin strips of light get through here and there, but it's otherwise dark as night.

Sensei holds his phone up to the door. When he turns on the light, it casts an eerie blue shadow on the door. He shines it around, like he's looking for something. Next to the doorknob, the faint, black silhouette of a butterfly appears.

"It's a simple black light," Sensei says shortly.

"You can make one with your phone's flashlight?"

"It's still just a simple version, so there's a lot it can't illuminate. It's fun to shine it on energy drinks or pineapple candies to see them glow, though."

I can't help but blurt out, "wow, you sound like a teacher."

"Butterflies can see ultraviolet light. A female cabbage white butterfly's wings reflect ultraviolet light, while the male's wings absorb it. That means the colour of the wings on their breeding partners look completely different from their own."

"…Wow, you sound just like a science teacher," Shouko-san mumbles. I burst out laughing.

"Maybe I don't seem like it to you guys, but I actually am a science teacher," Sensei indignantly retorts to our laughter.

He holds up his light again and carefully examines the butterfly.

"This is no laughing matter. I don't have an exhaustive list of all the things this light can show, so I'm not completely confident, but this looks like some kind of bodily fluid. Probably blood."

"Blood…"

We immediately stop laughing. There's… No way… Shouko-san and I look at each other.

"It's not as shiny as it is in TV shows."

"That's because they use luminol. Even if you spray some, it only lasts a few seconds, and it isn't that bright and clear."

"Isn't it possible that it isn't blood?"

"Even if it isn't, painting a butterfly next to the doorknob with bodily fluids isn't something a person in their right mind would do."

Fair point. Sensei takes out his handkerchief, grabs the doorknob with it, and slowly turns it. He shines the light in the dimly lit hallway. There are butterflies painted on the floor at regular intervals, leading somewhere. There's no way it's just a coincidental stain. Someone drew these with a purpose in mind. The hallway is dark enough, even without closing the curtains.

The sun sets early in winter. It's already past 3pm. Everything will be dyed by the setting sun in about half an hour. I suddenly remember Ranka and check my phone. There's a message from her saying "I have something to do so I can't come. I'll talk to you later." I'm more relieved than disappointed. I don't want to involve her in this creepy butterfly hunt.

Black butterflies flutter through the dimly lit corridors of the old house. The three of us slowly follow its blood coloured footprints, step by step. I feel a chill different from the cold of winter. It's tickling the back of my neck. Every time the black light reveals another butterfly, I get goosebumps. Yet we don't stop. The three of us silently follow the trail until we eventually reach the living room. We draw the curtains closed, and shine the light around the room. The footprints are all heading to the same place. The butterflies crawl under the rug. Toward the couch where I was having tea earlier. Sensei looks at Shouko-san for permission. She nods. Wordlessly, we push the couch aside, and move the rug. Unfortunately, there's nothing but floorboards.

"…There's nothing here."

The butterfly's footprints seem to have vanished.

“Maybe the living room is the start, and it leads to that door?”

Maybe there’s something in that room, after all?

“But there wasn’t a butterfly on the outside, was there?”

“Oh…”

Now that he mentions it, that’s right. The butterfly’s footprints went from the inside of the door to here.

“…Do you have any energy drinks?” Isozaki-sensei suddenly asks as he looks at the floor.

“Huh?”

“Any drink with vitamin B in it. A health drink is fine, too.”

“I do, but...”

Shouko-san retrieves a drink from the fridge, looking confused.

“I’ll clean it up after.”

“What?”

Before we can say anything, Isozaki-sensei pours the drink out on the floor. Then, he shines the light on it. It glows fluorescent yellow.

“Vitamin B glows,” he says, then runs his hand along the floor.

The bright light follows the movement of his hand, like it’s leaving a trail.

“Oh…”

Soon, a strange, thin light appears under his hand. As he continues to move his hand, a large rectangle appears. The drink has flowed into a groove in the floor that wasn’t noticeable before.

“This is…”

Shouko-san can’t hide her surprise as her voice trembles.

“It was well hidden in the grain of the wooden floor, but it looks like there’s a storeroom here. We should be able to move the floorboards here.”

Thanks to the drink he poured out, the slight change in elevation has been made obvious. Sensei hooks his fingers into the edge of the floorboard, and after a bit of fumbling, he manages to move it.

“Yuriko, the light.”

I turn on the lights for him.

“Why is there a door in a place like this…?”

Who would build a hidden cellar here, and why? And why did they leave a trail of black butterflies, as if to show where it is? I have a slight headache. It sounds like an alarm is going off, somewhere in my head.

## Part 4

It looks like one of those tornado shelters you see in movies that are set in the middle of the US, with the wooden door under the floor. When I pull the handle, it just clatters, and doesn't open.

"It's locked."

"Indeed…"

"Do you remember if there were any extra keys left here? I wonder if the person who managed this house even knew about this basement."

"I don't think I have a key for it… If Kouji knew about it, then I'm sure he would have told me," Shouko-san says with a grim expression. She crosses her arms and looks at the door. "…The person who managed this house until recently was an architect who had a secret basement built in his own house…" She says in a scratchy voice.

"Then this is his basement?"

"I don't know, but possibly… I heard that he had a secret mistress, so maybe it was for her, but I'm not sure."

Before I can even ask, Shouko-san adds in a trembling voice that both he and his mistress are dead.

"What should we do? Should we call a locksmith, or leave it as it is?" Sensei asks. He wipes the floor with some paper towel so it doesn't get all sticky.

Shouko-san's face suddenly twists like she's about to cry.

"But… What if there's another corpse?"

"That's ridiculous. Neither Kujou-san, nor Shoutarou are here today," Sensei says with a forced smile when he sees that Shouko-san is worried.

"But still…"

She's genuinely worried that there will be a dead body under there.

"…I don't want to leave it like this. The door is made of wood, so we can destroy it. I have a hatchet and a pickaxe in the shed for splitting firewood."

"Are you okay with that?"

It sounds pretty drastic. Sensei furrows his brow.

"It's fine. It's my house now, anyway. I can just do something about it when I renovate."

"You don't have to force it now, we can call a-"

"I-I'll do it!"

I step in front of Isozaki-sensei when I notice that he looks reluctant. It's manual labour, after all… Sensei would absolutely never do any kind of demolition work. However, I also understand Shouko-san's concerns. I've encountered corpses with Sakurako-san before. One of them was my grandma. Once you've seen one, your chest will always feel tight with fear that you'll see another one. You can never know for sure if or when it'll happen again. I never would have expected it to happen to me until I saw a dead person for the first time. It very well could happen again.

I can't leave Shouko-san feeling anxious over this. I walk through a narrow path in the snow out to the shed, and drag the hatchet and pickaxe back to the house. I regret wearing a skirt. The tools are rusty and heavy, and they're so cold that my fingers stick to them. It feels surreal to be swinging around something so dangerous inside of a house. But I have to do it. The hatchet scares me for some reason, so I lift the pickaxe over my head. This is my first time destroying something like this. Even though I have permission, it feels so terribly wrong. My hands tremble from the guilt.

The wood is hard. Each time I bring down the pickaxe against it, it just shakes with a dull clang. I swing down with all my might, and this time, I leave a hole.

"Ugh… Rrgh!"

But now I can't get the end of the pickaxe back out.

"Woah!"

I plant my feet firmly and pull on it as hard as I can, but I lose my grip. I fall onto my butt, while the pickaxe falls to the ground by Isozaki-sensei's feet with a loud crash.

"…I thought so… I'll do it myself."

Shouko-san worriedly asks Isozaki-sensei and I if we're okay. I hear her take a breath like she's resolving herself as she picks up the hatchet in her slender hands. She unsteadily lifts the hatchet over her head, and with a shaky step—

"Okay! I get it! I'll do it!"

Unable to stand it any longer, Isozaki-sensei grabs the handle to stop her. He looks so mad that I'm worried he's going to cut us down instead of the door. He rolls up the sleeves of his sweater, and lifts the hatchet. I didn't think he'd be any stronger than Shouko-san, but his arms are more muscular than I expected. Every time he brings down the hatchet the veins on his arms pop, and the door makes a dull whine. After several strikes, I hear a small bang as the right side of the door gives way and falls into the darkness.

"It's open."

Sensei reaches his hand into the darkness, and unlocks the door with a tiny, metallic noise. When I peek inside, cold air flows out.

"…"

Shouko-san anxiously squeezes my arm.

"I'll go check first, just in case there really is a dead body inside," she says courageously. Her voice is trembling.

She looks to Isozaki-sensei, but he quickly turns his head away.

"…No, I'll go. It's fine."

I'm not Tatewaki-kun, but I've been hanging out with Sakurako-san for over a year now.

"But…"

"It's fine. I'm going."

I squeeze Shouko-san's hand. Isozaki-sensei looks at us and sighs.

"You two… There really aren't that many corpses lying around. You've been poisoned by Kujou-san."

He takes the tape off his phone's flashlight and turns it on.

"More importantly, make sure you watch your step so you don't end up dead yourselves."

His tone sounds cold, but he's still worried about us. He starts walking down the stairs. He turns around to face the entrance. It looks like he found a light switch. With a click, the lights come on. The whole basement is illuminated now. Shouko-san's expression gets a little tenser. The room must be bigger than she expected. The area right in front of the stairs has a concrete wall in front of it, so we can't see exactly how big it is. All I can say for sure is that there's a room on the other side of the wall because of the light leaking through.

"It doesn't smell like someone died here, at least," Isozaki-sensei says. He went down the stairs first.

"You can tell?" Shouko-san asks.

"Yeah," Sensei replies with a displeased look on his face.

I know about that. I heard about it before. Sensei and Tatewaki-kun went to Shouunkyou after Sakurako-san disappeared, and they found the aftermath of a double suicide.

As far as I can tell, there's only two lights down here. The one above the stairs is small and weak, so the ground is still dimly lit.

Shouko-san and I carefully make our way down the steps. It smells damp and stuffy, but there's also a hint of a more pleasant smell, like incense. It's a slightly sweet smell. I feel like I've smelled it somewhere before. After making sure we safely made it down the stairs, Sensei nervously peeks around the wall.

"Ugh!" He instantly lets out a small groan.

Shouko-san and I instinctively hug each other and tremble.

"I-is it a dead body?!"

"No… There's no 'corpse' that catches my eye, but…"

His words sound strangely ambiguous.

"Is it dangerous?"

"It's not… dangerous, I think. Probably… If I had to say, it's something that makes your brain blank out."

"Blank out?"

"You'll… Understand when you see it."

I can’t just take a look without a care after hearing that. Shouko-san and I nod at each other for encouragement before heading to the other side of the wall.

It looks like a storeroom. There are several metal racks, cardboard boxes sitting open, and clothing cases strewn about in a disorganized mess. There’s a pipe bed with a mattress, and something that looks like an IV next to it. Maybe it was some kind of sick room. There are documents scattered on the floor, too. It looks like a thief or something was looking for something in a hurry. But none of that is the “blank out” that Isozaki-sensei was talking about.

“What… Is this?”

Shouko-san asks in a shaky voice as she looks at the wall. There’s a desk and chair against the wall in front of the stairs. On the wall right across from us, ready to greet us as soon as we enter the room, is a huge collection of photographs stuck to the wall. They’re all pictures of a person we know well. There’s no mistaking it. Every single one of these pictures is of Sakurako-san.

## Part 5

“There’s so many… They’re all Sakurako-san… Why?”

It’s a bizarre, nauseating sight. The entire wall is completely covered in pictures. Some of them are even pictures that nobody but her should ever see. She isn’t looking at the camera in most of them, like she didn’t know they were being taken. A few of them look to be group pictures taken from school, though. There are pictures of her from all different ages, too. There’s one where she looks like she’s still in elementary school, wearing a black and white dress. In the centre of it all is one lock of long, black hair. It’s framed and displayed with care, like a specimen.

I’m disgusted to my core. This is absolutely bizarre. Even more so than the butterflies drawn in bodily fluids. Isozaki-sensei has his hand over his mouth, like he’s trying not to throw up. The sight isn’t just terrifying, it invokes a physical feeling of revulsion.

“Is this… Sakurako-san’s hair?”

“…No, I don’t think so.”

To my surprise, Shouko-san denies it in a trembling voice after swallowing hard.

“I think it’s… Kaoruko’s hair…” Shouko-san says while shaking her head, and adds that it’s too long and straight to be Sakurako-san’s.

“Agiku-san’s…? Did they get it from her remains? But her body was never found—“

Shouko-san nods at my question. She takes a deep breath.

“He must have been in pain after throwing himself into the river. He survived, and found a clump of Agiku-san’s hair in his hand. Shitara-sensei says that the pain of death surpasses love.”

Even when someone chooses to die, their body instinctively tries to survive. That’s why when people commit a lover’s suicide by jumping into water, they often have a handful of the other person’s hair. The pain of death surpasses even love. People will try to save themselves, even if it means pushing their partner’s head under the water. How sad. But I think humans are creatures that are born in order to survive.

“But… Does that mean this room was created by the young painter who attempted suicide?” Isozaki-sensei asks with a quizzical expression.

“No… That’s unlikely. After his suicide attempt, he tried to forget about it all and married a woman and had a child. The child was born with no body hair, though.”

“…Body hair?”

“Yeah. He was sure that Kaoruko-san had cursed him… He ended up successfully committing suicide a few years after their attempt at a double suicide. So he couldn’t have collected and displayed these photos of Sakurako-san,” Shouko-san replies.

Isozaki-sensei, who has been listening to the story in silence, has a frightening expression on his face.

“…Sensei?”

“Where is that child with no body hair now?” He asks quietly. His hands are clenched tightly.

Shouko-san crosses her arms and stares into space, thinking about something.

“…Suzushiro.”

“Huh?”

“It was Suzushiro. I don’t remember his real name. He was Ryuusei’s final disciple, and looked after this house for a long time. I think he’s the one who painted the eyes.”

“—Suzushiro?” Isozaki-sensei repeats with a blank look on his face. Suddenly, a strained laugh comes out of his throat.

“Isozaki-sensei…?”

He starts to laugh even louder. I’ve never seen him like this before.

“What’s wrong…?”

“What’s wrong?! It’s Suzushiro! Another name for the Suzushiro plant is Hanabusa!” Sensei says excitedly. “I’ve found it.”

I feel a chill go down my spine, and spread through my whole body.

“Chiyoda-san. Do you know where this Suzushiro man is now?”

Shouko-san is taken aback by the terrifying feeling Sensei is giving, but shakes her head no.

“He’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yes. A few years ago… Remember how there was a torrential downpour that caused a landslide on the road to Tenninkyo? Unfortunately, the landslide hit a bus and a car. The driver of the car was swallowed up by the mud, and…” Shouko-san says, then tells us that after Suzushiro-san passed away, her relatives took over managing this house.

But in that case, who was collecting these photos?

“A few years ago? But that’s odd. This picture has Tatewaki-kun in it.”

Tatewaki-kun is in the background of a few of the pictures of Sakurako-san.

“Shoutarou met Kujou-san when he was in his third year of middle school.”

“That’s true, but… I don’t think these pictures are that old…. Look, he bought this hoodie when we went shopping in Hakodate around Christmas last year.”

I remember it well. We met up at the mall, and he showed me the clothes he bought while we ate ice cream. There's no mistake.

"Even if Suzushiro really was Hanabusa, I still met two 'phantoms'… So he definitely wasn't working alone."

Having said that, I notice something. I remember it. That scent. The scent of incense. Nothing else smells quite like it. I know the scent of this room. Before I kidnapped Ii-chan, I was brought to this room. They made me sleep in the bed over there…

"Look. There's a bunch of these butterflies. He wasn't working alone. Even when the flowers withered, the butterflies still returned… Couldn't Kouji-san be involved in this?"

Shouko-san's eyes widen at my timid question.

"That's impossible! Kouji would never get involved with a criminal! My uncle, too…"

"It's possible he cooperated without committing any crimes himself. He might not have even been aware of it," Isozaki-sensei says.

He starts turning all the cardboard boxes right side up. They're full of newspapers, women's magazines, and gossip magazines.

"I can't deny that… Kouji is a kind person, so it's entirely possible that he was deceived…" Shouko-san mutters.

"While Kouji-san's father was managing the house, did he rent it out to anyone? Especially someone who has been coming and going a lot lately…"

I start picking up the newspapers that are scattered by my feet. There's a story about a murder from a few years ago.

"It's been about a month since I got this house, but I haven't seen any unfamiliar tire tracks or footprints in the snow," Shouko-san says.

She slowly peeks into the box closest to herself.

"It's possible that they quickly took away anything important once they heard you were taking the house. Did you tell anyone about it?"

"No, I haven't told many people about it. I have told Sakurako's uncle, Shitara-sensei, though. If it were possible, I'd like it if he could spend some quiet time here."

“In that case, Kouji-san might have told someone.”

“You’re right… I’ll ask him.” Shouko-san suddenly goes quiet.

“Shouko-san?”

“Look… A safe.”

A brand new safe was hidden behind the box. Shouko-san looks down at it with a bewildered expression.

“It looks like a new model. There’s no keyhole, or buttons to put in a code…. How do you open it?”

Shouko-san sits on the floor, looking like she’s given up. Isozaki-sensei and I stand in front of the safe. I genuinely have no idea what to do about it. There’s a mark printed on it that looks strangely familiar, though. It looks like an N. Sensei looks at it, then takes out his phone.

“Let’s see… this is an NFC mark. I think it has an electronic lock.”

“So it’s not the kind you type numbers into?”

“Right. You probably need a cellphone or keycard associated with it. There’s even ones that have a ring now.”

“…A ring?” Upon hearing that, Shouko-san’s eyes suddenly widen. “Ophelia…”

“Hm?”

“Ophelia… like the type of rose? Or from Hamlet?” Isozaki-sensei asks Shouko-san.

“No, Millais. John Everett Millais. The Pre-Raphaelite— could that ring be the key? My goodness!”

“Technology has advanced enough that it could be a ring, but it’s more likely a card-“

Sensei and I look at each other. Neither of us understand why Shouko-san is trembling. She looks back at us while she makes a phone call.

“Hey, Kouji? It’s me. I have something urgent to ask you.”

The call eventually goes through. She sounds impatient.

“Sorry if you don’t want to talk about this, but… I found a ring at the villa in Asahidake…. Yeah, it looks like it’s his secret girlfriend’s. What happened to the ring she had? Did they burn it with her when she was cremated?”

“Oh, no, Sapporo is quite strict about what you can bring into a cremation. They won’t even let you bring glasses in. They just put it in the urn.” I can faintly hear “Kouji-san’s” voice from the phone.

I see… It seems like Asahikawa is pretty relaxed about what you bring.

“I’m sorry, but… I need you to send me that ring when you have time. The reason is- What? I can just have it?”

Apparently Kouji-san has some business to attend to in Higashikasachou, which is right next to Asahikawa. He says that he’ll grab the ring and bring it now. As soon as Shouko-san ends the call, I hear a phone ring. She checks her phone, but it’s not the one ringing. It’s not mine, either. Sensei realizes that it must be his, so he takes out his phone. I look at the name on the screen. It’s from Tatewaki-kun.

## Second Bone: Ranka Azechi’s Case

### Part 1

The air in the car is prickling with so much tension I feel like I’m carsick, so I press my cheek against the window to calm myself down. Utsumi-san’s voice fills the whole car.

“So you really think Shou-chan is going to commit a crime, Yamaji-san? The Shou-chan that we know? The good, honest Shoutarou-chan? That’s impossible, isn’t it?”

He’s looking at me through the rear view mirror, since I’m in the back seat. I respond with a sigh.

“ Even you think so, goth loli-chan?! Why?!”

“…I’m sorry to say, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he crossed that line for Kujou-san’s sake.”

That’s always how it is. It’s always for Kujou-san. As far as I know, Kujou-san is like Goete’s Mephistopheles to Shoutarou. She uses clever words to lure him into hell. Yamaji-san, who is in the driver’s seat, seems to agree with my opinion.

“There’s… There’s no way! It’s Shou-chan, after all! There’s not many good kids like him these days.”

‘It’s because he’s a good kid.’ He’s a good kid, so he can’t do anything bad. He just does what people want to blend in.

“I’m sure that even you understand that the more cowardly you are, the easier it is to live in this world, and the better off you are. Right, Fluffymi ?”

Shoutarou is an idiot. He’s stupidly honest, and he believes in things like justice, goodwill, and trust. He always thinks he has to do what’s right, even if he ends up getting hurt. Even putting all that aside, he’ll still try to protect Kujou-san. Kujou-san is an incomprehensible person.

“That’s always been a weak point for Tatewaki,” I say.

“A weak point? I think it’s important to be cowardly,” Yamaji-san answers provokingly.

“It’s not good and evil that rule society, it’s wealth, fame, and having the loudest voice in the room. As a member of the police who faces evil, I’ve realized that the weak aren’t included in a world that’s ruled by ‘justice.’” His serious tone makes me feel both a chilling coldness, and a bit of anger.

Utsumi-san frowns in confusion. “Sounds like you’ve been thinking about something serious… Yamaji-san, you sound like a detective.”

“Do you not think about it?”

“All an officer from a police box like me needs to think about is how to prevent the people in the neighbourhood from feeling pain, fear, or discomfort as much as possible,” Utsumi-san says somewhat apathetically. “Besides, I’m not Kujou-san. I think that the truth depends on one’s perspective, just like right and wrong do. There’s laws in place to make things as fair and even as possible,” he says, moving his hands palm-down horizontally. “Our job is to make it as even as possible for everyone. That kind of idealism should be left on social media and variety shows.”

Utsumi-san sounds a bit annoyed. Yamaji-san glares at him, but Utsumi-san just shrugs his shoulders. I’m kind of surprised. I always thought of Yamaji-san as being more cool-headed, and

Utsumi-san as being more hot-blooded. I watch their contrasting personalities from the back seat. I hate how strained the atmosphere feels.

"Whatever! This isn't about Shoutarou and Kujou-san anymore. If those two are really going to break the law, we have to stop them. Let's find those two fast!"

Really, Kujou-san is Kujou-san, and Shoutarou is Shoutarou. Impatiently watching the scenery flow by, I feel poison welling up deep inside of me. I'm furious. I'm 100 times more worried about Shoutarou. It's making me feel sick. I had plans to go to a Christmas party and have a sleepover with Yuriko today. I shouldn't have agonized over that present so much.

Part 2

That day, I was heading to Shoutarou's house with his present in hand. It's a coin and key case from an outdoor brand with penguins on it that he said he wanted before. It has a spot for a commuter pass, too. Although I don't think she'll use it, I bought one for Kujou-san as well, just in case. They can match. Shoutarou would never tell Kujou-san that he wanted them to have a matching set of something himself.

I'd be too embarrassed to give it to him at school, and my aunt just asked me to babysit my uncle's sister's 3 kids who live near Twin Harp Bridge, so I thought I'd just deliver it directly to his house. But it also feels awkward to explain why I got it to him in person. Just leaving it there like it's natural makes me feel nervous, too, though.

I'm not sure if it's because we got a bunch of snow last night, or if they don't do a very good job of removing it, but it's really hard to walk here. Ugh, I wish I hadn't come here. I hope he isn't home. Then I could just leave it with his mom… Or maybe I should just throw it in the mailbox… I kick a pile of snow.

"Oh, aren't you Yuriko-chan's frilly goth friend?"

As I'm walking along, thinking about how they've hardly cleared the snow from this area, someone suddenly calls out to me.

"…Oh, the fluffy guy."

It’s Utsumi-san, the police officer I met on Halloween with frizzy hair. He’s a kindhearted person.

“Perfect timing. Could you help me shovel the snow?”

“What? No way.”

“Don’t say that… Here, use this shovel.” He holds out the frigid handle of a red shovel.

“I don’t want to. Besides, this isn’t even your house, is it Fluffymi?”

This isn’t the haunted apartment that I heard about before. We’re in front of an old, one storey house.

“No, but I live nearby. See the slight curve here? The snow plow left a bunch of heavy chunks of ice here when it went by this morning. I can’t just leave it here, because kids walk to school along here, and it would be dangerous to walk around it on the road because it’s a blind spot for drivers.”

I have to admit, I didn’t even notice Utsumi-san standing there, and I definitely would have just walked on the road to avoid the snow pile.

“I contacted the snow removal centre, but they have their limits.”

When it snows a lot in the evening, like it did last night, it’s not unusual to see big build ups like this from when they plow the roads. Especially on a curve like this, it’s inevitable that they would miss a spot, or drop some of the snow along the way.

“Okay, but why are you clearing it?”

“It would be too late to clear it after an accident already happened, and the old man who lives here says his back hurts. The couple next door said I could use their snow melter, so I figured I’d give it a go.”

“Then this has nothing to do with me!”

“I’ll buy you a can of coffee later!”

That’s way too much work for one can of coffee.

“Geez…” I get what he means about preventing an accident, though. “I’ll help, but you have to get me a frappe from Starbucks instead of canned coffee.”

“Uh… You want an iced drink when it’s so cold out…?”

“You get hot from moving, don’t you? Let’s just get this over with!”

When you decide to do something, you should do it right away. I’m meeting with Yuriko later, so I need to hurry up and give Shoutarou his present.

Asahikawa may get a lot of snow, but it’s way less than Sapporo gets. The snow isn’t as wet, but it’s so cold it’s not even funny. I’m used to handling heavy snow from growing up in Sapporo, though. One of Asahikawa’s merits is that more people have household snow melters than in Sapporo.

The snow melting tank is near the end of the neighbour’s driveway, which is a car or two wider than the ones in Sapporo. The tank opens into the ground, so you pour snow in, then it spits out the water on the side after it melts.

I’m surprised Utsumi-san has so much strength and stamina. Like, really surprised. He seems so squishy. I do too, though. But I’ve been doing karate for 9 years, ever since I was in elementary school. I still do basic training almost every day.

I don’t have to worry about my clothes as I move around since I wore less frills due to babysitting today. The snow clears up fairly quickly.

“What? You’re here for Shou-chan?”

“Hm? Um… Yeah, to return a book.”

“Oh? What about Chiyoda-san’s Christmas party?”

“Mm, I might go later? It depends on Yuriko. It doesn’t look like Shoutarou and Imai are going. What about you, Fluffymi ?”

When I ask if he was invited, Utsumi-san grins.

“That’s right, Icchan invited me, but I have a date today.”

“Liar. Wait, seriously? And they aren’t 2D or anything?”

“Nope, this is for real, for real,” he says ecstatically.

I’m kind of jealous for some reason. He’s a normie.

“Hey, do you do this kind of stuff all the time, even when you aren’t working, Fluffymi?”

Shoveling snow in front of someone else’s house right before an important date is pushing the limits of being a good person.

“Oh, well, it’s a new residential area around here.” The answer I get is a bit different from the unprincipled, Shoutarou-ish good will I expected.

“…What do you mean?”

“This is a kind of crime prevention. Like risk management, you know? Like teaching kids about traffic safety. Trying to prevent car accidents. You have to put in effort to stop crimes before they happen.”

“But shoveling snow? Wouldn’t that just be an accident?”

“Yeah. This old man has lived here for a long time, but all the other houses around here are new, right? That’s because there’s lot of young families living here now. When the residents are close in age, they tend to have similar lifestyles and activities at similar times. That means there’s blind spots in their schedules.”

“Ah… So basically they’ll mostly be out and about at the same times .”

There aren’t many small businesses around here, so everyone will have to go to Main Street to shop. That means there will be times when hardly anyone is home in the neighbourhood for a while.

“The more time you spend away from home, the more chances there are for thieves to break in. If there’s lots of empty houses, driveways covered in snow, and trash on the ground, bad people will know it’s a good place to strike.”

It’s a well known story that when New York cleaned up graffiti, crime rates went down.

“If the area is clean, that means it’s being taken care of, which thieves take to mean someone is watching over it. You wouldn’t steal something unless you were confident you could get away with it, right? It’s important to make sure the city never gives people the confidence to do that.”

“…So you’re helping by shoveling snow?”

“Only when I have free time. But nobody wants to steal from a place where a police officer hangs out, and they usually inspect the area before they strike.”

Does that mean he does this all the time?

“I’m surprised… I didn’t think you were so diligent, Fluffymi .”

“That’s right, this fluffy mess is covering some real brains,” he says. He ruffles the curly hair sticking out from under his knit hat.

I want to be a police officer in the future, but could I ever be like him?

“Hey, why did you decide to become a cop in the first place?” I ask as I break up a big clump of snow and toss it into the snow melter.

“Hm?”

“Is it because you like the work they do? Did someone inspire you? Or was it on a whim?”

Utsumi-san usually answers any question in a lighthearted way, but he looks reluctant to reply to this particular question.

“What’s up? Is it… Something you don’t want to talk about?”

Is it because it’s me asking?

“It’s not that I don’t want to talk about it, but… Hmm… I guess you could say it’s because of ‘admiration.’”

“What do you mean?”

“It was my cousin. He was a little older than me, but I really loved him. He always wanted to be a police officer. I don’t know why, but he always said that he wanted to work in a police box, rather than being a detective. Then, he suddenly got sick.”

The deadly disease quickly took everything from Utsumi-san’s cousin, including his dreams and future. Utsumi-san tells me sadly that it happened just 3 months after his cousin joined the police academy.

“I was in grade 5 or so when I found out he wasn’t doing well. I saw everyone around me looking sad, and declared ‘I’m going to be a police officer!’ in the heat of the moment.”

“In the heat of the moment? So you didn’t really want to be one?”

“That’s right. I was just going with the flow.”

“Seriously?”

Unbelievable. He just does whatever…

“But everyone was so happy, and my cousin was like ‘I’m counting on you!’ and stuff. I couldn’t just back out after that. My

parents were telling my relatives and everyone that I was gonna be a police officer, so I just kept going with it."

"That's a terrible reason. My dreams are shattered."

We've mostly finished clearing the snow in front of the first house, so now we're helping shovel a bit for the neighbour that lent us the snow melter.

I feel like I've been corrupted. Is it really okay to just "go with the flow" for something so important…? But now that I think about it, it really was kind of Utsumi-san to really become a police officer for his cousin.

"So, is that really the only reason?"

"Well, there wasn't anything else I wanted to do."

"I see…"

Although I'm kind of disappointed… It's a very Utsumi-san-ish reason. At least he had the option of picking something else. Still, I believe the real reason he became a police officer was because he didn't want to let his cousin's family down.

"Then… Fluffymi , in the future—"

"Oh! Utsumi-san, you cleaned it up so well!" Just as I start to speak, the old man comes out of the house to praise us for clearing the snow.

"Oh, it's nothing. And look, Shou-chan from the Tatewaki house had a friend over, and she helped me."

"Oh! Thank you. Are you Shou-chan's girlfriend?"

"No, absolutely not." I turn my face away from the old man for saying something so nonsensical.

"Hahaha. But really, thank you so much for helping me, girlie,"

He says as he goes back into the entrance and brings out a cardboard box with several mandarin oranges rolling around inside.

"There's not a lot, but please take a few. They're sweet and delicious." The old man holds the box out to me to show his gratitude with a wide smile.

"Oh…"

I don't need anything as thanks. It's not his fault that it snowed.

"Yay! I love oranges!" Before I can refuse, Utsumi-san happily accepts the oranges.

“Is that right? My daughter got married and moved to Ehime, so she sends me some every year.”

“Really? Next time I want some oranges, I’ll come by and shovel snow for you again.”

“Then I’ll make sure to have a box of them for you.”

“Let me know next time, and I’ll come right away.”

He really doesn’t know how to hold back. I can’t help but laugh when I see the two of them smiling and chatting. So that’s what it’s like to have charisma. Regardless of if it’s worth the effort, if Utsumi-san didn’t accept the oranges as payment, the old man would only be able to thank him verbally, which would leave him feeling uncomfortable. The world is all about give and take. A relationship where only one side gives is unhealthy for both sides. So I’ll just have to accept his payment and that’ll be the end of it. Besides, it makes it easier for the old man to ask for help again when he needs it if he doesn’t feel like he’s already in our debt.

I’m surprised by Utsumi-san’s thoughtfulness and nonchalant kindness. He thinks about others so much, even though he’s just a fluffball…

After saying goodbye to the old man, we head over to his neighbour’s house to thank them for letting us use their snow melter. They have a little baby, so we shovel the snow away from the front of their house to thank them. After finishing our “snow diplomacy mission,” Utsumi-san and I leave their house.

“You’re heading to Shou-chan’s place, right? There’s been some trouble around here recently, so I’ll walk you there.”

“It’s still light out, so I’ll be fine.”

Even though I *am* super cute.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I’ll ask Shou-chan’s mom to bring us some snacks while we’re there.”

“So that’s what you’re really after.”

“I have these oranges now, so I don’t even have to be ashamed!” Utsumi-san proudly holds up the box.

His innocent smile doesn’t seem to be an act at all, though I doubt he would ever put that much thought into it anyway. How much of this is his honest feelings, and how much is actual concern? It’s

easy to see that he has good communication skills. Despite how I look (or rather, how I try to look) I'm actually quite shy. If I became a police officer, would I be able to do things like this? I look up at the sky as I start to lose confidence in myself.

"Woah! Be careful, Goth Loli-chan! Right there! A pup left something big there!" Utsumi-san says, frantically grabbing my arm.

That could have been catastrophic.

"That was close… it's huge, maybe it's from a human…" Utsumi-san mutters, relieved that we avoided it.

I burst into laughter. Utsumi-san gives me a satisfied smile.

"I actually wanted a job where I made people laugh when I grew up."

"Huh?"

"Like an entertainer, or something. But even now, I still find myself making people smile. It's not the outside that matters, it's the inside, you know? Just like an orange. So I don't have any regrets about my current job at all, so it all works out," Utsumi-san says.

When an incident, accident, or other misfortune occurs, people lose the ability to smile. Utsumi-san's current career is protecting peoples' smiles from sadness.

"I see… I'm kind of relieved."

"Really?"

"I don't really know why, but I think I really wanted you to enjoy your work, Fluffymi."

"Well… the details aren't always fun, but…"

From then until we got to the Tatewaki house, I asked about the daily work involved in being a police officer. During the day, he deals with lost and found items, deals with people illegally parked, and handles shoplifters and burglaries. At night, he deals with suspicious people, fights, drunk people, noise complaints, etc. In addition, he does patrols and communicates with the people in the neighbourhood.

Of course, there's also times when he has to rush to the scene of a gruesome injury or fatal accident. There was a time when nobody had seen an old man leave his house for two weeks, and the

mail was pulling up in his mailbox… A few people reported it. The more I hear about it, the more difficult it sounds.

"I don't think I could handle a dead body…" Thinking about the dismembered body floating down the river a little while back makes me nauseated.

As we're talking, the Tatewaki residence comes into view. An unfamiliar black car is parked in front of the house. It's not Kujou-san's or Shoutarou's mom's car. Maybe one of his grandfathers came by to say merry Christmas? I wonder as we get closer.

Utsumi-san stops dead in his tracks. There's a man in the driver's seat, looking at us. I can feel his gaze. It feels off somehow… The hair on the back of my neck is standing up.

"…"

Utsumi-san and I look at each other for a moment, then pretend to stay calm as we ring the intercom. There's no response, so we ring it again after a minute, but still nothing happens. I guess nobody is home. Shoutarou is probably off hanging out with Kujou-san, like always. Now that I think about it, it's better that he isn't home. I put my present for him in the mailbox.

Then, I hear the sound of a car door closing behind me, so I quickly turn around. An older man I don't recognize is standing there. He's decently handsome. He has a square jaw, chiseled features, thick eyebrows, and sharp eyes. His suit looks a bit old and worn out, but it looks cool on him. But who is he? I look at Utsumi-san. He shakes his head to tell me he doesn't know, either.

Shoutarou has a weird circle of friends. He knows some really strange people. I can't decide if I should say something, or quietly walk away.

"Excuse me."

Before I can decide, he speaks to us first.

"Is something wrong?" Utsumi-san responds sociably, even though I'm still wary.

"No… I haven't been able to get in touch with Tatewaki-kun, so I wanted to ask if you know anything," the man says while looking at me.

“Nah, we were just wondering why he wasn’t home, hahaha… Anyway, who are you? Do you know Shou-chan?”

“He must be at Kujou-san’s place, after all… Sorry for the late introduction. My name is Yamaji.”

As soon as he says his name, Utsumi-san perks up.

“Yamaji-san! Yamaji-san from Mashike! You helped Shou-chan in Hakodate!”

“I’ve retired now, though.”

I remember hearing about a police officer that he met in Mashike, but why was he in Hakodate? Watching Utsumi-san cheerfully shake the other man’s hand, my wariness melts away.

“Oh yeah, he said he hasn’t been able to contact you lately, so he was worried.”

As soon as the words leave Utsumi-san’s mouth, Yamaji-san’s thick eyebrows wrinkle like he’s pained.

“Actually… I’ve been looking for my brother, who went missing, but I started to feel like I was in danger. I'm hiding now so that nothing happens to my family or friends.”

“What’s threatening you?” I ask. His brow furrows even more.

“Ghosts- or rather, specimens.”

“Specimens?”

“Yes. They were made by the man who collects evil butterflies.”

“Evil… Butterflies…?”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. An eerie chill creeps up my neck.

“It hasn’t been all bad, though. As I was looking for my brother, I started to notice their patterns, and now I’ve found who murdered Kujo-san’s little brother. The ghosts are trying to get Shoutarou to cooperate with them, and get Kujou-san to kill the culprit responsible for her brother’s death.”

“K-kill?! Shou-chan and Kujo-san?! That’s ridiculous,” Utsumi-san laughs.

Yamaji-san doesn’t smile a single bit. His expression is still stern.

“…Do you really think something is going to happen to those two?”

“Yes, so we have to stop it.”

A cold wind blows from the North. I still don’t buy it, but I message Shoutarou on LINE anyway. He doesn’t read it, so I try calling him, but it says his phone is off.

“There’s no way…” Utsumi-san says with a strained expression.

“For now, I think I’ll visit Kujou-san’s house,” Yamaji-san says.

“I’ll go, too,” Utsumi-san quickly replies.

What the hell is that idiot Shoutarou doing? While I curse him 100 times in my mind, I climb into the back seat of Yamaji-san’s car.

Part 3

I don’t really understand what Yamaji-san is saying, but I at least understand that Shoutarou is doing something crazy. I’m starting to realize that I’ve stuck my nose into something important. This is the first time I’ve heard of Kujou-san’s brother. I ask Utsumi-san about it as I put on my seatbelt, but he says he doesn’t really know much about it.

“I see, so you don’t know about it… 15 years ago, Kujou-san lost her younger brother due to an unknown cause.”

“Unknown cause?”

“It’s unclear what happened. He went missing one evening, then 3 days later he was found drowned in the pond at Nagayama shrine nearby.”

“Oh…”

What a horrifying story. And sad.

“But wouldn’t that just be an accident?” Utsumi-san asks.

“Yes, but it simply wasn’t investigated properly. That’s why I looked into it as much as I could,” Yamaji-san says.

A tragedy from 15 years ago. At first I thought it sounded like unnecessary prying, but I guess a police officer can’t help but dwell on their past cases.

According to Yamaji-san, this unfortunate “accident” occurred 15 years ago. Kujou-san was in elementary school, and her younger brother, Soutarou-kun, was around 5 years old.

Kujou-san had a routine of going for evening walks. She'd go straight down the conifer lined road in front of the house, past the nearby shrine and park, around the elementary school, then back home. Apparently Gran used to walk that route with her when Kujou-san was younger. She created that daily routine so that Kujou-san would eat a bit more at dinner, since she had a small appetite. It's a path she walked every day. Her younger brother, Soutarou, would also go with them usually.

The Kujou family's housekeeper had recently quit, so Gran had a lot of extra jobs to do, including preparing dinner. She didn't have many chances to go on their walks anymore. Nowadays, most people wouldn't let an elementary school girl go for a walk by herself at sunset, but… things were a bit more lenient back then.

So, like always, Kujou-san went for her walk alone that day. Her brother wanted to go with her, but Kujou-san didn't want to deal with the slower pace of a 5 year old, so she told him to ask their mother or Gran and left. It wasn't that she particularly enjoyed the walks, she was just going through her routine. She probably just wanted to get it over with quickly. Because of that, and the fact that she was leaving a little bit later than usual, she decided to go alone.

So, she walked to Nagayama shrine. On the way, she saw a white car driving incredibly fast down the narrow residential road. Other than that, her walk was the same as always. Once the city was dyed completely red by the sunset, Kujou-san returned home alone. That's when the adults noticed that Soutarou-kun was missing.

Apparently Gran was busy preparing dinner that day. The head of the family, Kujou-san's grandfather, was having a guest over, so dinner was supposed to be a bit fancier than usual. The family had received a bunch of oysters as a gift, so it took a lot of preparation to steam them in sake and fry them.

So when little Soutarou-kun asked if he could go on a walk, Gran said, "ask your sister or mother to take you."

"Okay!" Soutarou-kun replied before leaving the kitchen.

That was the last time Gran saw him.

Kujou-san and Soutarou-kun's mother, Nadeshiko-san, hadn't been actively involved in raising her children in a long time. Her first born child wasn't a boy like the family wanted, and she got fed up with her daughter's eccentricities, so she had the servants raise her. But even when Soutarou-kun was born, the boy she wanted, she didn't even play with him.

That day, Nadeshiko-san wasn't in a good mood. She suffered from migraines, and had spent the whole day with a headache. When her son asked to go on a walk, she told him, "go ask someone else."

Normally if she said that, someone would gladly do it. Gran, or Sakurako-san, or the head of the family, who loved his grandchildren dearly. Nadeshiko Kujou was apathetic toward her family, and had no idea that they were having a guest over that day and she was the only one who could take him on a walk.

Soutarou-kun was supposedly a smart, kind boy who loved his family. He was already turned down 3 times, and he knew his grandfather was busy with a guest, which is probably why he decided to leave home on his own. He was probably trying to follow his sister, or he figured he'd be able to walk a familiar route alone. Nobody saw him leave, and nobody knew that he was gone.

Kujou-san never saw her little brother while she was walking. That day, she took a shorter route than usual. She walked to Nagayama shrine, walked a circle around the shrine grounds, then went home. She would have noticed if her brother had followed her.

While it's not an overly busy street all the time, the straight road is lined with three temples, Myouzenji, Tenneiji, and Daidouji. In addition, there's the Nagayama community centre across the street from one of the temples that also had a library inside. The Takasu-Higashi Kagura line is quite busy, and connects to the road as well. There's also the Nagayama Tonden Park, Nagayama Shrine, elementary school, and Central Park alongside it. Cram schools and convenience stores, too.

In other words, there's a not insignificant amount of foot traffic. In the early evening there must have been a lot of people walking

their dogs. People rushing home, too. And yet, no one saw Soutarou-kun walking around alone. In the span of 40 minutes, Soutarou-kun disappeared.

As Kujou-san got about halfway between the Daidouji and Tenneiji shrines, she saw the strange sedan driving wildly in the North-Northwest direction on the road across from Tenneiji shrine. She couldn't read the license plate in that split second, but she saw it started with 23 and the next number was either a 6, and 8, or a 0. The adults didn't pay it any mind, though.

Not only the Kujou family, but the surrounding residents as well frantically searched for Soutarou-kun. When they failed to find him, they contacted the police that night. Starting the next morning, a large-scale search began. The Ishikari River and Nagayama Shinkawa River are within 2 kilometers, as well as several waterways in the agricultural area to the East.

The desperate search continued for two days, but Soutarou-kun was never found. Early in the morning of the third day, he was found floating face-down in a pond within the grounds of Nagayama shrine.

"…There's no way that was an accident," I can't help but murmur after hearing the story.

"Right. But at the time his clothes weren't in disarray, and he had no obvious wounds, so the police ruled it an accident."

"Why?! That makes no sense!"

"I'm not trying to defend them, but… Kujou-san was a local celebrity and wanted to avoid a scandal, so an autopsy wasn't performed at the mother's strong request. The incident was quickly dismissed."

Besides, his mother was being criticized by the police about why she wasn't watching her child, and was mentally unstable. Nadeshiko-san blamed Gran and Kujou-san extremely harshly. On the second day, she became violent while accusing Kujou-san of having killed her brother, saying it was her fault and she never should have given birth to Kujou-san.

However, the family and police blamed Nadeshiko-san for her negligence instead. Her father in particular held her accountable as Soutarou-kun's mother. He was appalled that she'd blame his death on an elementary school aged girl. It's possible that their fighting hindered the investigation. The police wanted to close off the case as an accident caused by the mother's negligence, so they even rejected professor Shitara's request to perform an autopsy on his nephew.

"There were no reports from people saying that they saw Soutarou-kun getting kidnapped, and nobody reported hearing any screams, so there was no proof that it wasn't an accident," Yamaji-san says.

He's gripping the steering wheel with a blank expression on his face.

"But… If he was suddenly grabbed and dragged into a car, then maybe he didn't have time to scream. Besides, people always say to be 'wary of strangers,' but most kidnappers seem to be nice people who are well liked by children. Maybe nobody was paying attention, not even Soutarou-kun," Utsumi-san says uncomfortably.

Adults always tell kids to "watch out for strangers," but children are far more likely to be targeted by someone they know than a complete stranger. In some cases, children develop close relationships with people that their parents don't know. If someone clearly looks suspicious, children and other people in the area will be wary of them. Not all criminals look like it. Sometimes a well loved neighbour is really a monster on the inside.

Yamaji-san sighs. Soutarou-kun's clothes weren't disturbed, but his shoes were missing for some reason. He had no obvious injuries, so his cause of death is unknown. Nobody knows where he was for the 3 days he was missing. He was a 5 year old child, but he went missing in a residential area, and it's hard to imagine that he got lost considering his house is a straight path from Nagayama Shrine. The more it was investigated, the more suspicious the case got. His clothes hardly had any dirt on them, especially considering he wore them for 3 days. He also wasn't wearing any shoes, but his socks weren't dirty at all.

I'm starting to feel sick. I feel sorry for Kujou-san. Even if she was in elementary school at the time, could she really believe that it was an accident? The older she got, the more she believed that someone did that to him. Maybe that's why she knows so much about crime. When I think about how she might just be weird because of the pain of losing her brother, I start to hate her less.

"There's more to the story."

"There is?"

"2 years after Soutarou-kun died, a 6 year old boy went missing in Higashi Takasu, on the opposite side of Ishikari River. He turned up dead in the river 2 days later."

An autopsy was performed, but they determined that he accidentally fell into the river and died.

"5 years after that, a 5 year old girl went missing. Her skeleton was discovered by a fisherman 3 months after she disappeared."

Asahikawa is full of rivers.  There's big ones and little ones. I think there's just over 160 rivers and 760 bridges in the city. It's inevitable that there will be the occasional accident, but we're taught in elementary school how to stay safe around them. As a result, there aren't many cases of people drowning.

"Didn't anyone find it suspicious that 3 children, all around the same age, died in the same city across 10 years?"

"Some people noticed it, and followed the case. They're now trying to use Kujou-san and Shoutarou to get revenge on the culprit."

"You… Must be joking. Why would they do that?"

I accidentally let a laugh slip out. There's no way I can believe that.

"I wish it were a joke… But for now, what's most important is stopping those two, rather than worrying about their motives. We probably can't get in touch with them right now because they're chasing the culprit."

Yamaji-san thought about reporting them to the police, but he doesn't know where they are, and the situation is too uncertain. Yamaji-san says that he wants to protect Shoutarou's future, too.

"I don't want him to be charged with attempted murder, or aiding and abetting a criminal. I just want to find him and stop him."

I guess that's why he ran into us at the Tatewaki house.

Eventually, we reach  Nagayama Shrine. There aren't many pedestrians around. It would be hard to kidnap a kid here, since there's banks and restaurants along here, and there's always cars driving by. The road straight to the Kujou residence is much quieter. There's a shrine, public facilities, and a residential area here. There aren't as many people on foot as I'd expect there to be, though. There's large buildings, spacious parks, impressive roadside trees, shrubs, hedges, and fences.

"Looking closely, there's a lot of blind spots," Utsumi-san murmurs. "If you wanted to, you could snatch a 5 year old boy in an instant with a car."

"More and more buildings and houses are getting security cameras lately, but back then there would have been plenty of blind corners," Yamaji-san says.

Soutarou-kun could have been grabbed in a split second. Kujou-san is clearly lacking anything resembling a human heart, but I can tell she cares about Shoutarou. Even he's aware that he resembles her little brother. There's some overlap between Shoutarou and Soutarou. I'm sure Kujou-san's brother was precious to her. I feel bad for her. My eyes start to feel hot, so I squeeze them shut. I can't cry for her, it's not my style.

Soon, the car stops at the Kujou house. When the YamaUtsu duo get out and ring the intercom, I hear that huge, white dog barking from the other side of the door. Utsumi-san shrinks back. I'm not thrilled about it, either. Regardless of if he's cute or not, that thing is some kind of hairy monster. Probably a keukegen, or something.

"Quiet down, Heta. You're so loud," Gran scolds the furball from the other side of the door. "Yes, who is it?"

Rather than using the intercom, Gran opens the door to speak with us directly.

"Hey there! It's Utsumi!"

He greets her without a hint of nervousness while hiding behind me. The reason being the furball's nose forcing its way through Gran's feet.

“Oh, welcome, Utsumi-san… And Ranka-sama, your outfit today is lovely.”

“Oh, and this is Yamaji-san, a police officer from Mashike. And Gran, just in case something happens, you shouldn’t open the door before seeing who’s there. For security reasons,” Utsumi-san says, and points to Yamaji-san who’s standing beside him.

“Oh my! Cherries! They look delicious, thank you for bringing them. And don’t worry about the door. Heta’s bark is completely different when it’s the young lady’s friends that are here compared to strangers. He was using his friend-bark today,” Gran says as she bows to Yamaji-san.

“You should use some of humanity’s modern conveniences instead of a dog. That’s what the intercom is for. Oh yeah, is Shou-chan here today? Or Kujou-san?”

“The young lady is out at the moment. The young master isn’t here today, either.” Gran pets the furball and looks down at him, saying, “they say I can’t trust you.”

The furball smiles back at her. I can’t tell if he understands or not.

“They should be going to the party at Lady Chiyoda’s new vacation home tonight. I have the day off,” Gran says with a smile.

From her behaviour, it doesn’t seem like Kujou-san is getting into trouble. She probably doesn’t know about it. For now, we thank Gran and depart from the Kujou house.

“But… Are those two really involved in something?”

“It’s true that Soutarou-kun’s situation doesn’t sound like an accident, so if they found out something then they’re probably looking into it. Maybe they’re even considering taking revenge, but today…” Yamaji-san trails off.

My messages on LINE still aren’t being marked as read, and my phone calls aren’t being picked up, either. I tried contacting Yuriko, but she doesn’t know about the two of them, either. I really do have a bad feeling about them, but if it turns out to be nothing, I can just say I’m glad nothing bad happened.

“So… What do we do, then? I don’t know where to look,” I ask again as Yamaji-san puts on his seatbelt in the driver’s seat.

The sky is cloudy and grey. It looks like it's going to snow again.

Utsumi-san fastens his seatbelt, and takes off his knit hat. His forehead is all sticky with sweat, but his hair is still puffy like always. If it wasn't for the current situation, I would have laughed at him.

"I'm not that confident, but… Could Kujou-san be visiting the other bereaved families? To look for connections between their cases and Soutarou-kun's, or look for clues about the killer," Utsumi-san says with a straight face, despite his current appearance.

"I thought that was a possibility, so I looked up their addresses in advance," Yamaji-san says.

He adds that they're only the addresses from when the incidents happened, so they could have moved since then. It's not like we have any better leads, though.

I know I could just leave this up to YamaUtsu  and go home, but for some reason I feel like I can't leave them alone. I've always been good at telling when something bad is going to happen, and I've had a bad feeling about this from the start.

I tell Yuriko that I won't be able to hang out with her later, and ready myself. To get myself fired up, I put on my favourite blue lipstick. It's the first lipstick I bought when I decided that I wanted to change myself. I always carry it in my bag. It's a charm to make me feel stronger.

I could easily just go home right now, but if something happened to Shoutarou, I know I'd regret it. I'm already starting to regret it now, though. I don't want him to end up getting hurt because I chose to believe that everything will work out. I came to Asahikawa to change myself. Shoutarou and Kujou-san are the ones who made this new place for me. It doesn't sit right with me to be in someone's debt, so now I can pay them back.

## Part 4

We drive along Hokkaido Route 37 toward Higashi Takasu. The car soon passes over Nagayama Bridge. It goes over a huge river. Utsumi-san says that it's the Ishikari River below us.

“This is the river that 6 year old Katsuki Fujii-kun and 5 year old Yuzuki Chiba fell into. Katsuki-kun was catching bugs when he disappeared, so it’s thought he fell into the river from the riverside. Yuzuki-chan was said to be walking on the bridge alone when she fell in.”

“...Falling aside, a 5 year old walking along here alone wouldn’t stand out much. There’s no fence, either.”

There’s quite a few cars on this road. Even putting the river aside, there’s no fence on the sides of the road, so wouldn’t you be worried about such a little kid walking into the street? No one wants to run over a child.

“Besides… A car only has to stop for an instant to grab a child. There’s no fence, so there’s nothing separating the road from the walkway,” Utsumi-san says.

He’s right. I don’t think it’d be possible in the middle of the bridge, but at the foot of the bridge or where it connects to the road below, it certainly wouldn’t be impossible.

“…There’s so many dangers like that. Even though it’s just an ordinary road.”

I never think about where blind spots are, or what hazards are around while I’m walking about. This isn’t a fun discovery.

Relying on the car navigator, we head to the older child’s, 6 year old Katsuki-kun’s, house first. The nameplate on the house doesn’t say Fujii. In front of the house is a half-broken snowman, a blue sled, and a cute little snow shovel for kids.

I ring the intercom. As I expected, the family living here is completely unrelated to the Fujii family. We briefly explain why we’re here. The woman who answers the door is holding a little boy who looks to be around Katsuki-kun’s age. She says that the family living two houses down might know where the Fujii family moved to, since they’ve lived there for a long time. I’m not sure if the boy is shy, spoiled, or scared of my makeup, but he’s clinging tightly to his mom. That’s right, don’t let go of him. I hope he’ll be okay.

We head  to the house that the mom told us about. The old man who lives there says that he remembers Fujii-san. Soon after

the incident, the parents got divorced and sold the house, so he doesn't know where they went.

"I don't know all the details, but I heard that the mother committed suicide," he says sadly.

I've heard that Kujou-san's mother did the same thing. If I died, would my mom kill herself, too? Utsumi-san suddenly pinches my cheek, bringing me back from my thoughts.

"W-what was that for?!"

"You should make sure your lips aren't blue when you're meeting someone new. Isn't it too cold for a blue hawaii?"

"It's not the same colour as shaved ice!"

Yamaji-san must have been thinking the same thing, since he's holding out his handkerchief for me. This is my lucky makeup. The air feels a little lighter, though. It must be Utsumi Magic. I'm not going to thank him, though.

"So what should we do now? Visit another house? Look into the girl who disappeared on the bridge?"

"Yeah…"

Yamaji-san puts a new address into the navigator. It's less than 5 minutes from here.

"It's been 8 years since the accident… If they've moved too, we're out of options," Utsumi-san says as he watches the scenery go by out the window.

Bits of snow start to fall.

After driving slowly through the residential roads that are narrowed by the snow, I can finally see the house. Luckily, the nameplate still says "Chiba." It could always be a relative, or a stranger with the same name, though. After we ring the intercom, an older woman comes out, looking at us suspiciously. Yamaji-san introduces himself as a police officer to quell her doubts.

"My grandson again… What is it this time?" She looks at us even more nervously and alert.

"Huh? Uh… No, this is actually about Yuzuki Chiba—"

"Did you find Yuzuki?!" The old woman suddenly leans forward.

“No… That’s not it…” Utsumi-san stammers, at a loss for words.

“Our friend who lives nearby lost her younger brother in a water-related accident that was very similar to hers. We’re currently investigating to see if there was something else going on… Though we might be causing trouble for you by visiting, so I’m sorry for the intrusion.” I had no choice but to take over.

Disappointment quickly spreads across the old woman’s face.

“Oh… Is that so…”

“I’m very sorry.” I force the words out as I bow my head.

“No, it’s fine… It’s alright. I understand.” She softly repeats “yes, I understand,” again.

She sits on the front steps, as if the threads of tension holding her up were cut.

“DNA tests confirmed that Yuzuki’s bones were found. But… I suppose I still believe she’s out there somewhere. I just can’t give up on her. Maybe they made a mistake with the test. Maybe she really will come home one day,” The old woman says as she holds her forehead.

“I’m sorry,” I say as I bow my head once again.

“It’s fine, I’m sorry. So then, what was your business with me? Could you tell me again?”

Although her lips are trembling, the old woman tries to stay calm as she looks up at YamaUtsu  and I. After I explain the situation to her again, she says “I see,” with an even more lonely expression.

“She still hasn’t come back. And I understand how your friend feels, but… I’d really like you to leave me alone. Even though you came out here, I can’t help you in any way,” she says, suddenly lethargic.

Even though she was so happy when she heard Yuzuki-chan’s name earlier.

“But… she might still be alive right n—“

“Yes, that’s right. It’d be wonderful if she was still alive… Even if that girl did come back alive, it’d be too late. Her family and everything else have already been destroyed.”

“Destroyed…”

My chest feels tight. My family was half destroyed because of me.

“I’m very sorry that you’ve fallen victim to a fraud,” Yamaji-san says while I’m still trying to think of something to say.

“…So you know.”

The woman looks down at the ground.

“That’s right. I was scammed out of over 10 million yen. They said it was to pay for the search for Yuzuki-chan.”

“What…?”

Utsumi-san and I both stiffen.

“Yes, that’s right… The first 3 months after my granddaughter disappeared were pure hell. My son resented his wife Eiko, me, and Yuzuki’s older brother. The media was horrible, too. We kept getting phone calls from complete strangers, they sent letters that said ‘murderer’ on them, and put dead animals in our mailbox. It was like everyone thought we killed Yuzuki ourselves.”

The events of that day were very similar to what happened with Kujou-san and Soutarou-kun. She followed her slightly older brother out to play, then disappeared. The river was flooded because of the melting snow, so everyone thought she might have slipped and fallen in. A lot of people helped with the search, but many more said cruel, heartless things to the girl’s mother and grandmother. The father was away on a business trip at the time, and he was especially resentful toward the mother. He was angry that he lost his beloved daughter, so he took his anger out on his son, mother, and wife.

“The police eventually called off the search, but Eiko-san didn’t give up. It’s only natural, of course. I didn’t want to give up, either. Since we hadn’t found her yet, I thought maybe she’d been kidnapped…”

Eiko-san searched tirelessly for her daughter every day, until she was found by a suspicious person. She was desperate for any help she could get, so she ended up being scammed out of millions of yen to pay for “search expenses.” Then, they asked for an additional 10 million yen. She didn’t want to back out after paying so much, so she took out a loan while keeping it a secret from her husband, using their house as collateral. Shortly after that, Yuzuki-

chan's body was discovered. The man from the sketchy search company disappeared, leaving them with a huge debt.

"I had no choice but to sell my house to help them pay it off, and move out here. My son's wife is working on trying to pay me back. My son stopped going home because he fell out of love with his wife. Yuzuki-chan had a brother who was 6 years older than her, so Eiko-san had to take care of him alone while working."

Yuzuki-chan's brother has moved out now. The parents aren't divorced, but they live completely separate lives.

"I know she'll never come back, but… I can't bring myself to leave this place, just in case. What if she comes back after all this time, and finds this house sitting empty?"

The old woman says that she just wants to pass away in peace. Her voice sounds like she's given up on everything.

"So even if you come here, there's nothing I can do to help you. Please, just leave."

Even though we said we were with the police, she refused us so strongly and said she wants nothing to do with this. There's nothing more we can say.

"…Someone who takes money from someone looking for their daughter isn't human."

After we return to the car, I bite my nails to vent my anger I have no outlet for. The two adults are silent.

"…So what should we do now?"

"Yeah… Maybe we could go look around Nagayama shrine where Soutarou-kun's body was found?" Utsumi-san asks.

"I guess so," Yamaji-san replies briefly.

I still can't get in touch with Shoutarou. Once again, the car crosses Nagayama bridge.

"When you're walking on a road like this, it's better to walk in the opposite direction that traffic is going. Putting a lane between you makes it harder to be kidnapped," Utsumi-san mumbles to himself as he watches the scenery flow by through the window. "A-Also, get a personal alarm! When you set it off, the criminal will try to stop it, so throw it as far as you can. The kidnapper will chase after it to turn it

off, so you can use that time to escape," He turns around to tell me as if he just remembered.

Honestly, I didn't know that's what you were supposed to do with it. I thought it was just good to make a loud noise when you're in danger.

"…I'm not the kind of kid people kidnap anymore."

"No, it can happen to anyone. You never know when or how you might get caught up in a crime. You're cute, Goth Loli-chan, so you have to be careful. Do you have a personal alarm?"

"Not a physical one, but I have an app on my phone for it. It's only natural, since I'm the adorable Ranka-sama."

I'm embarrassed that he called me cute, so I deliberately reply over-confidently. I don't want to throw my phone , though.

"It's true that a lot of elementary school aged children are kidnapped. There's plenty of opportunities when they walk alone, and their small size makes them easier to kidnap. But once they reach high school age, they're more likely to be victims of sex crimes. It doesn't just apply to girls, it happens to boys as well. The gender of the perpetrator and the victim have nothing to do with each other. It's not just girls being attacked by strange men. It's not uncommon for women to assault women, or men to assault men," Utsumi-san tells me with a serious expression. "Even bright, nice neighborhoods have blind spots. A criminal could be hiding in one of those blind spots, reaching out to grab you when you can't see them. Children are usually very wary, but criminals often live nearby. With the rise of social media and online games these days, there's even more places for culprits to get in touch with their victims."

I know the dangers of social media all too well. My hands start trembling. It feels like he knows everything. But that can't be true. He shouldn't know about that. I'm sure Kujou-san and Shoutarou wouldn't tell him about my embarrassing past without permission.

"But… But how long ago was Kujou-san's brother kidnapped? 15 years ago or so? Plus a 5 year old kid wouldn't have social media or be playing online games in the first place. The same goes for Katsuki-kun and Yuzuki-chan."

I'm getting scared, so I decide  to change the subject. Well, it's more like I brought us back to the main topic.

"That's true. Well… I'd say it's likely that the culprit lived in the same neighbourhood, or used to live there, so they knew the area well. And also… It was probably someone that Soutarou-kun knew…"

"So he let his guard down and was taken before he could scream?"

"Yeah, probably. Most child kidnappings happen within 100 meters of their house, usually after school or in the evening."

Utsumi-san sounds like Sakurako-san when he talks about statistics like that. He doesn't strike me as the type to be good with numbers.

"Since they kept the kids for a few days, they probably lived in a detached house. They likely had some kind of distant family ties or some other relationship, and would have had their own car. Well, Kujou-san says she saw a car, but… It could have been unrelated."

"Even when she was in elementary school, Kujou-san could probably remember a car she only saw once…" Utsumi-san adds.

I nod. I'm sure she would.

"…It could have been someone else's car that they borrowed, or a company car. There's a lot of white company cars, after all," Yamaji-san says, after staying silent the whole time.

"Anyway, my point is that they were probably familiar with the area, and had some kind of relationship that would lead Soutarou-kun to let his guard down… Hey, that area is pretty old, isn't it?"

"It is… Nagayama is sort of like the starting point for where they started developing Kamikawara Plains." Utsumi-san says that it's the oldest residential area in Asahikawa.

I didn't know that. I'm half from Sapporo and half from Kitakyushu, though.

"What, really?! You didn't know? Nagayama was named after Takeshirou Nagayama, the founder."

"Oh… Is that like Kametarou Ootomo, who created Souseigawa and stuff in Sapporo?"

"I don't know who that is."

“Really? He was kinda cool cause he only had one eye.”

“…Nagayama Memorial Park and Takeshirou Nagayama’s old house are right next to Sapporo Factory, so I thought people from Sapporo would know him…” Yamaji-san says, cutting into Utsumi-san and my chit chat.

“Sapporo Factory, huh… It always makes me think of the outdoors, but I’ve only really been to the movie theatre and some events there, never the park next to it. I mostly buy my clothes from IKEUCHI, a goth specialty store. Wait, you’re from Sapporo, Yama-chin?”

“No, but I was assigned to a police station in the capital and— More importantly, weren’t we talking about Nagayama? We’re at the shrine already,” Yamaji-san says hurriedly with his hands still on the steering wheel.

“Oh, right. I was just thinking that some of the people who know about what happened might still live near Kujou-san’s house. Maybe someone is willing to talk?”

“That’s true… It might be good to check if Kujou-san is back yet, then ask around.”

If we keep on following the evidence, we’ll run into Kujou-san and Shoutarou at some point. I check the clock in the car. It’s already after 2:30. If he’s going to get revenge or do something bad, I hope he at least does it later.

Part 5

I don’t know if she went out somewhere because she has the day off, or if she’s out getting groceries or something, but Gran isn’t at the Kujou house. When I ring the intercom, I hear the displeased barking from the furball. It’s like he’s protesting being left at home. But Kujou-san and Shoutarou don’t seem to be back yet. The gate was closed, too, which is unusual. Although the three of us expected this, we’re still a little disappointed. Seriously, Shoutarou. Where are you?

“So… What now?” I ask Utsumi-san as he puts his knit hat back on after he gets out of the car.

Just then, I hear the clattering of a door opening. It's coming for a house diagonally across the street, a short distance away. It's a single story home with a nameplate that reads "Asada." The old lady living there seems to just be picking up some vegetables or something that were left on the porch.

"Oh, excuse meee!" Utsumi-san calls out to the old woman right away.

"…Yes?"

The wrinkly woman looks at him suspiciously.

"Sorry this is so sudden, but we're going to a Christmas party at Kujou-san's house just across the street, but we won't be able to park the car in front of her house… I know it's a bother, but would it be okay if we parked in front of your house for a few hours?" Utsumi-san pleads.

"I don't mind, but the snow…"

"Oh, of course we'll clear the snow away so it doesn't get in the way of people trying to pass by."

"What? You're going to shovel the snow?"

"It snowed a lot last night, so we'll clean it up for you."

The snow from last night has formed a dense hill in front of the woman's house. It looks like she's only managed to clear the snow from the area right in front of her door.

"I'm too old to do it myself, and I live alone, so I'm grateful, but… Isn't it a bother for you?" The woman smiles timidly.

"That's all the more reason for us to help. With the three of us, we'll be done in no time. Right, guys?" Utsumi-san looks back at Yamaji-san and I.

I have no choice but to agree. Yamaji-san forces a smile and shrugs his shoulders, but it doesn't seem to be a "no."

"It's almost the end of the year, so it'll be easier to get all the snow cleared away at once."

"Then… I'll take your word for it…"

"Of course! Actually, that girl over there is super good at shoveling snow… Oh, could we borrow some shovels from you? And where should we put the snow? Behind the house, or just in the yard?"

It’s amazing how fast Utsumi-san can get close to people. It’s the second time today he’s used snow shoveling to his advantage. Well, it’s true that it’ll be quick with the three of us, and as Utsumi-san said, I’m pretty good at it. It’s not something just anyone can do well. Shoveling snow is hard work, but when you get as good as me, you can quickly clear away lots of snow with minimal effort and fatigue.

We can’t spend too long on this, so it’s time to get to work. We arm ourselves with shovels, and use perfect teamwork like a pack of wolves chasing their prey to clear away the snow in no time. The old woman warms up some non-alcoholic rice malt amazake for each of us. It’s warm and delicious.

“Thank you for your help. Lately even just shoveling right in front of the house is too exhausting for me.”

“No problemo ~. Have you always lived here alone, Asada-san?” Utsumi-san asks, over-familiarly.

“Yes, ever since my husband passed away. It’s been over 10 years now.”

The woman talks with us amicably, though I’m not sure if it’s because she’s thankful for the help shoveling, or because she’s lonely.

“My daughter comes to visit from time to time, but she lives in Sapporo. My son lives in Tokyo and wants me to live with him, but I want to spend my days here, leisurely. I’d feel constrained, and feel bad for his wife.”

“I see. So your children are all independent now?”

“Yes, even my grandchildren are working adults now. The youngest is turning 20 this year.”

We’re standing while talking under the covered porch. When she invites us inside, Utsumi-san declines by saying “Oh no, we have some shopping to do.”

It looks like the old woman is in full chatting mode.

“Aw, I guess they’re not at the age where you spoil them anymore, then. But… 20 years old, huh? That’s about the same age that Soutarou-kun would be.”

“Hm?” Asada-san’s expression instantly stiffens.

“Time sure flies. I can’t believe it’s already been 15 years.”

“…Yes, I suppose it has.”

This topic is taboo. Is it something that nobody touches?

“It’s a special age for grandmothers like us.  Gran has been talking about Soutarou-kun quite a bit recently.”

She suddenly becomes nervous. She glances at the Kujou house and lowers her voice before replying to Utsumi-san.

“…Osawa-san has a lot of regrets from back then,” Asada-san says, her expression relaxing a bit from hearing that.

She’s probably relieved that we’re not just prying  for no reason, and that we actually know Gran. It was mostly a lie, though.

“She was crying and apologizing to the head of the household for his son’s death… I felt so bad for them, I couldn’t watch.”

Asada-san casts her gaze down and sadly forces the words out as she remembers the past. My heart stings just hearing about it.

“But… She didn’t do anything wrong.”

I’m not a fan of Kujou-san, but I love Gran. She’s like a kind, warm, sweet grandma to everyone. It’s frustrating that she blames herself so much. I don’t think Kujou-san did anything wrong, either. She was still in elementary school, it’s not her responsibility to bear that burden.

“We heard about the mother…”

“…I don’t think it was anyone’s fault. Every family has times when something almost went sideways while nobody was looking,“ the old woman says. “Just because an accident happened in a split second doesn’t mean they weren’t watching him properly. Every family has different parenting styles.”

That’s true, but… For some reason, I get this hazy feeling when I hear about Soutarou-kun’s story. I can’t accept that people are being blamed for what happened.

“It’s wrong to blame the family for not paying attention. It’s someone else’s fault.”

“Why?” Yamaji-san says. He’s been quietly sipping his amazake until now.

“What?”

“Is that because Soutarou-kun wasn’t a normal lost kid? Because he disappeared, as if he was spirited away?”

“Yes… I know that he disappeared in an instant.”

“So you’re saying you believe that a third party was responsible for his disappearance?”

“Oh…”

Asada-san seems confused by his questioning, and tells us that there’s nothing more she can say about it. She turns to look away from us. Utsumi-san lets out a sad sigh as he looks at the woman.

“I think so, too… Even now, I still wonder if it was really just an accident. Doesn’t it seem strange if you think about it?”

“…”

The woman doesn’t answer him for a while. She keeps staring off into space, then sighs.

“You’re right… But at the time, it didn’t feel right to say anything about it.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah…” Asada-san looks down at her feet.

“So there weren’t any rumours going around? Like someone seeing a suspicious person or car, anything like that?” Utsumi-san asks.

“…There were some. They said there was a strange man loitering around… And you know Houshou-san next door? The young married couple? The Komiya family used to live there back in the day, and their middle son was a shut-in. He sometimes went out for walks at night, but he didn’t have a job. He didn’t have any social hobbies, either.”

She adds that he really liked anime and manga, but she says it like it’s  a bad thing which kind of annoys me. She’s biased. Most kids grow up watching anime about robot cats and anpan superheroes, so if anime and manga really were the gateway to evil, 70% of the population would be criminals.

“Saying anime and manga encourage crime is ridiculous since differentiating between reality and fiction is—“ I start to retort without thinking, but Utsumi-san stops me.

Yamaji-san doesn't say anything, he just wordlessly pushes the amazake to me… Maybe he's telling me to shut up? But I absolutely, totally, 100% didn't say anything wrong.

"There were rumors that he was the culprit, since sometimes he'd shout angrily out the window. About a year after Soutarou-kun disappeared, the family moved away. Maybe they couldn't stand it anymore."

So he was in the house right next to Kujou-san's. This is consistent with what Utsumi-san said about "most child abductions happen within 100 meters of the victim's house." And if he was abducted right as he left the house, there wouldn't be many witnesses. But… That's a pretty bold move, right? If Soutarou-kun shouted, you'd be noticed right away.

"Do you think he was the culprit, Asada-san?"

"…I'm not sure. Also, their second son wasn't home that day, which was unusual. I don't know if it's true or not, but…" The woman says ambiguously. "Well… They were a very serious family. The mother was a housewife, and the father was a teacher. The youngest child was working at a prestigious company in another prefecture. The oldest son was a used car salesman, but the mother always said it was a frivolous job. He was doing good work, so I don't know what's so wrong with it…" The old woman says, wrinkling her nose. "Their second son was also normal at first. But after failing his university entrance exams and being scolded harshly by his father, he stopped leaving the house."

"That poor kid, there's no way he's the culprit," Utsumi-san says.

The woman nods with a lonely expression.

"Yes, you're right… He was such a sweet boy when he was little. No matter what happened, he wasn't the kind of kid who could do something so violent."

"Can you think of anything else?" Yamaji-san asks.

"I'm not sure if it's true, but I've heard that there are sometimes suspicious people near Nagayama Shrine. Well, near the elementary and middle schools, to be exact. Naked men hanging around in the area, or hiding in public washrooms."

You hear about people like that everywhere, though. Not to say that one of those people isn't the culprit, but it seems unlikely.

"But… People on the outside can't see what's going on inside the houses," the woman mutters with a sigh. "…Shouji-san, the head of the neighbourhood association, had a problem where his child was bullying another kid in their class. Tatebayashi-san just down the street said that her husband would beat her when he was drunk. There's dark parts you can't see from the outside."

I suddenly remember  something my mom said to me. When she had no idea that I was selling embarrassing pictures of myself online, she told me that she didn't think I was "that kind of girl." Even my mom, who I see every day, couldn't see the darkness I kept hidden. There's no way a stranger could know what was really going on.

We leave Asada-san's house with the small comfort that the people who lived nearby cared about what happened 15 years ago.

Part 6

Nagayama Shrine is cold and quiet in winter. The three of us walk through to the pond where Soutarou-kun's body was discovered. The pond is quite large. Unfortunately, neither Shoutarou nor Kujou-san are there.

"A long time ago, when the town was suffering from a massive crop failure, they decided to build this pond so the people living there could have a job to provide for their families," Utsumi-san says.

It's sad that they found a corpse here, when it was meant to be a public project to help people survive. I lift my leg and brush off the snow I accidentally got inside my boot. My 30 denier armour  isn't enough today, so I'm still cold.

I wonder what we're going to do next? Will we really be able to find Shoutarou at this rate? He still hasn't answered my texts.

As I watch a duck curl up to protect itself from the cold, a young Shinto priest walks by wearing light coloured clothes. Is he purifying himself?

"Excuse me. Have you seen a high school boy or a woman in her late 20s with long hair, by any chance?"

He tilts his head a bit.

“Umm… I’m not sure if it’s the people you’re looking for, but I saw a high school student with a woman who had short hair earlier.”

The three of us look at each other.

“Short hair…?”

Did Kujou-san suddenly get a haircut? I can’t say for sure whether it’s them or not, so I’m at a loss.

“Was this the boy?” I have no choice but to find a picture of Shoutarou on my phone and show it to the priest.

“Oh! That looks like him. They seemed to be waiting for someone. Eventually, a man arrived, and I heard them say something about going to the Asahiyama Zoo.”

“Asahiyama?”

I mean… I know Shoutarou likes the zoo, but… Who’s the man they met with ? And who is the girl with short hair?

“They were an odd group. They didn’t seem friendly with each other, like it was their first time meeting, so I was worried that there was some kind of trouble…” He adds that he thought it was weird that they were all different ages, including one minor. “But these days, we get a lot of people who visit to get a goshuin , and we sometimes get groups of people with all different ages. I figured they met on social media or something…”

He pauses for a moment before continuing.

“But… None of them seemed like they came here to see the shrine,” the priest says with a strange look in his eyes.

“Oh… T-that’s right! We were actually at an offline meetup for a game! I just passed one of my guild members!” I quickly make up an excuse.

Now that I think about it, we’re a group of all different ages, and we haven't actually visited the shrine yet. I’m also a super cute minor who’s hanging out with two old guys. I have to make us seem normal. It’d be bad if he reported me, especially since I’m with two cops (well, one of them is a former cop). My life would go up in flames.

“The topic of the bear charms you sell here came up, but I guess they decided to visit Asahiyama first.”

I suddenly unearth the one thing I know about this shrine. I remember Yuriko saying they have “cute bear charms” here.

“I see. The charms are designed after a waka poem that Takeshiro Nagayama, the enshrined deity, composed. It goes ‘For the sake of the country, open up the Ezo wilderness, where the bears live.’ Please buy one before you leave. It’s only about the price of one gacha roll,” the priest says with a laugh.

It seems he doesn’t think the three of us are up to no good anymore.

“Okay! I’ll whale for one! And next time we’ll bring the other three so we can have a proper shrine visit!”

“Watch how you phrase it, Ran-chan…” Utsumi-san mutters with a wry smile, but he leaves it alone.

Yamaji-san looks like he wants to object, too, but we have more important things to do. But wait, who *is* the third person?

With doubts lingering in my mind, I greet the two priests as I approach the main shrine. Sure, we’re looking for a missing person, but it’s rude not to greet the God of the shrine. Utsumi-san hands out 10 yen coins, then we all toss them into the offering box and put our palms together. Please don’t let Shoutarou-kun and Kujou-san do anything stupid, and let us find them. I’m not sure if my wish will come true since I used someone else’s money, but he’s probably wishing for the same thing, so it should be fine. I’m still worried, though, so I toss in a 100 yen coin from my pocket. I only have 1 more year of high school left. I don’t want anyone to get in my way, and I don’t want to have any regrets.

“There’s no need to worry,” Utsumi-san, who has already finished praying, says to me as I still have my hands tightly pressed together.

“Nagayama Shrine gives blessings to marriages, but it also helps reconcile broken bonds.”

“ It’s for reconciliation?”

“Yep. If its blessings are strong enough to mend bonds that have been broken, it must work even better on bonds that are still intact. So I know that Shou-chan and everyone is going to be fine.”

That's a pretty forced interpretation… Even as I think that, I still find myself wanting to believe him. Maybe it's the cold winter air making me want to hold onto something. If something were to happen to Shoutarou, we would all change, too. It'd become the number 3 that I hate so much. I absolutely hate it.

We keep up a quick pace as we leave the shrine and head to Asahiyama Zoo. I stare at the sky as the sun begins to set, thinking about how I'll be so mad at him if he's just having fun at the zoo like normal, but if he actually is doing something criminal, it'll be unforgivable.

Part 7

Apparently Asahiyama Zoo stops permitting entry at 3pm during winter. We just barely manage to get in. The park is decorated for Christmas, and beautiful as always. I wish we were here for fun instead. Actually, I should come here with Yuriko. There's an event going on, so there's still lots of guests in the park. Honestly, I can't even begin to wonder where Shoutarou is.

"Should we make a lost child announcement? The wolves are probably howling around now, so we can kill two birds with one stone," Utsumi-san says.

"Wait, you like wolves but not the furball, Fluffymi?"

"No, I hate all animals. I just thought you'd like them."

"Well they are pretty cool…"

Okay, well, he's right. I do like them. The wolves seem to howl along with the park announcements. I've heard they react particularly well to the park closing announcement, so guests sometimes stay for it.

"You think they're cool? This place is so dangerous that my legs are shaking."

"Don't you at least think penguins and seals are cute? They're so round. Why don't you try coming here with your girlfriend sometime?"

"Ugh…" He gives me a weird response.

"What do you mean ugh?"

"I actually asked her to go on a date with me here today."

“To Asahiyama?”

“Yeah. She texted back saying that she has to work, so we’ll have to go another time. She’s a nurse, so she’s really busy…” Utsumi-san says with a bitter smile. “It’s probably for the best, though…”

He starts complaining about how he’s been having a hard time getting in touch with her lately, and this date would have been the first time he’d seen her in 2 weeks. He doesn’t really seem that sad about it, though. Maybe it’s because he has other fun things to do all the time, or he’s given up on her. I feel like it’s the former, though.

Putting the wolves and Utsumi-san’s girlfriend aside for now, Yamaji-san suggests that putting out an announcement would be the quickest way to find them. We start walking up the gentle slope toward the help centre in the middle of the zoo. Since I grew up in Sapporo, Maruyama Zoo is the first zoo that I think of. They have an exceptional reptile exhibit, and it’s getting better and better each year. It’s scary when the crows try to steal your food, though.

This is my first time coming to the Asahiyama Zoo. I’m surprised that it doesn’t smell like animals here. All the changes in elevation mean that you can’t get a good look at the whole park at once, so it’s exciting wondering which animal you’ll get to see next. You get to look at the animals from a different perspective from normal, too.

I’ve heard that Asahiyama is fun in winter, but even after moving to Asahikawa, I haven’t gone to a zoo in winter. Yuriko says that the seals look like perfect spheres in winter. I want to see a penguin walk, too. If we hadn’t come here for a reason, I could have at least watched the penguins swim… It’s sad, but I can always come back another day…

Eventually, we get  to the help centre. It’s a cute building nestled between the seal and penguin exhibits. Utsumi-san offers to be our representative, so he goes inside to make the announcement while Yamaji-san and I wait outside. He stays quiet and looks away from me, like he doesn’t want to meet my curious gaze.

“Yamaji-san, don’t you want a girlfriend? It’s Christmas time, after all,” I say, deliberately ignoring his ‘please don’t talk to me’

aura.

He just smiles slightly, and doesn't answer my question.

I guess we don't mesh well on our own. I have nothing better to do than look at the flyers on the side of the building. There's a lot of them, probably because it's Christmas time. Among them is a flier for an "Animal Doll Exhibit" being held at the Animal Materials Exhibition Hall. It has dolls of animals associated with Christmas, and picture book readings. The flier has pictures of the venue decorated for Christmas.

"...Oh?"

I notice  a familiar doll in one of the pictures. It's surrounded by picture books and dolls of reindeer, bears, snowmen, sheep, and elves.

"What is it?"

I saw it somewhere recently… Oh, that's right. Shoutarou was looking for it.

"This… There's a Butterfly Maiden."

"Hm?" Yamaji-san, who seemed apathetic until now, turns to look when he hears me murmur.

"...The doll in this picture… Tatewaki was investigating it a little while back."

I believe they were made by a doll artist from Hokkaido who passed away already. Butterfly Maidens are born from a butterfly and a human. Maybe it's here because of the cute sheep-like doll with big, curly horns that was made by the same artist that it's placed next to. Or maybe it's some kind of Christmas fairy. But… why here? Is it just a coincidence?

"Let's take a look at the Animal Materials Exhibition Hall," Yamaji-san says with a grim expression, like he's suddenly worried.

"Huh? But shouldn't we wait for Tatewa–"

"Hmm? What's up with you two?" Utsumi-san looks  puzzled by the strange atmosphere he walked into as soon as he left the support centre.

"We're going to the Animal Materials Exhibition Hall."

"There? Why?"

I look behind me to see Yamaji-san already walking away without listening to us, then look back at Utsumi-san who also doesn't know what to do.

"...I guess we'll go, too, then."

Apparently he already asked the staff to keep Shoutarou there if he comes by so we can find him easily. I don't know where this exhibition hall is, so I follow the other two who're familiar with the area. I walk up the snowy slope as fast as I can, while still being careful not to slip. I have a strange feeling that something is wrong, but I don't know why. I just have this intense feeling of urgency.

Before long, we arrive  at the Animal Materials Exhibition Hall. It's the kind of place that Kujou-san would love to visit. I look around at the bones and other stuff they have on display, but there's no sign of Shoutarou. I don't see Yamaji-san, either. The dolls are in the library upstairs. There's nobody else inside, probably because the park is about to close.

"Good… I finally caught up to you… What's wrong?"

When I walk up to the second floor, I see Yamaji-san standing alone and exhausted in front of the doll exhibit. He doesn't say anything. Is he scared? Or maybe he's angry? I follow his gaze.

"What…?"

The maiden doll is there. But the beautiful, ivory coloured head that should be above her shoulders is missing.

## Part 8

Faces are strange. Just by not having one, everything changes. No other body part gives the same feeling of loss. I guess faces mean everything to people. But at the same time, the doll has a different kind of beauty than when she was whole. An otherworldly type of beauty. More hellish. That ethereal mysteriousness, like it's sneering at me from somewhere I can't see, sends a sweet chill down my spine.

"Ew, creepy!" Utsumi-san shivers.

It looks like he only feels a simple fear of the doll. Even though it's so pretty…

"But… Why?"

Why doesn't it have a head?

"Why…? They probably took it away, since the 'real butterfly' is inside the head."

"By 'they' do you mean… Tatewaki? What are you talking about?"

Why just the Butterfly Maiden? Why not the sheep next to it? I tilt my head to the side. Yamaji-san lets out a long sigh.

"The person who made this doll used to make Hanabusa's specimens. She was given a very special task."

"Hanabusa…"

"Yes, Hanabusa. The doll maker's role was to collect the 'white butterflies' and turn them into pure maidens. In other words, she was supposed to grind up the sphenoid bones into powder, then mix it into the plaster used to make the dolls' faces."

Okay, but who is Hanabusa? I have no idea what he's talking about.

"Humans have butterflies in their heads. Beautiful, fragile, white butterflies. But they'll never be able to fly freely through the air. Nobody else will ever love them, and they'll eventually be reduced to ash."

Yamaji-san extends a finger and traces a line from the area between my eyebrows to the bridge of my nose. It makes me shiver.

"A certain person thought that was lamentable. Another person longed for the butterfly that was trapped in the head of their little brother, who died young. They thought it was beautiful, so they decided to collect it. It was a show of their loyalty and dedication… And soon became their reason for living."

"I don't know what any of that means."

Still, I get a bad feeling from it. There's a dark look in his eyes. I look at Utsumi-san, pleading for him to help get me out of this conversation, but he has his back turned to us. He's looking somewhere else.

"Fluffymi…? What's wrong?"

"I just… Thought  this looked familiar."

He's looking at a big map of Asahikawa that's hung up on the wall.

“Familiar?”

I mean, he lives there, so I hope it looks familiar. I follow his gaze, and realize that he’s looking at a pin stuck in the map.

“You mean this pin?”

It’s a thin, fragile looking marking pin. The top looks like a cherry blossom petal.

“Yeah, I think I’ve seen them at Kujou-san’s house… The pins she uses to hold her preserved insects have a cherry blossom on them…” Utsumi-san adds that she always uses the cherry blossom pins for her insect specimens as a mark showing that she made them.

“Then… Do you think Kujou-san left this here?”

“I don’t know… But maybe.”

I wonder if it’s some kind of message? Or if she’s trying to tell someone that there’s something wrong?

“...”

Yamaji-san pulls the pin out with a stiff expression. It was marking a spot that’s supposed to be haunted near the outskirts of Asahikawa - Kamuikotan. It doesn’t seem like the kind of place you’d go in winter, and it’s not that popular, either.

“...What should we do?” I ask Yamaji-san, who’s glaring at the map.

But even I know it’s a stupid question. Even if it’s a trap, there’s no other choice.

I still have no idea what’s going on, who Hanabusa is, or what Shoutarou and Kujou-san are supposed to be involved in. I’m completely clueless. Utsumi-san is, too.

“Can you please just tell me everything from the beginning?” Utsumi-san says to Yamaji-san as soon as we get back to the car.

It’s rare to see him with such a displeased expression. I felt like I couldn’t ask, or that I’d be annoying if I did, but cutting off a doll’s head and stealing it is pretty insane. If Shoutarou and Kujou-san really did that, then… Utsumi-san and I feel an unprecedented tension. Somewhere deep down, I felt like Yamaji-san’s worries were exaggerated. But most of all, I thought there was no way those two

would do anything criminal. Suddenly, I've lost the confidence to assert that.

"..."

At first Yamaji-san remains silent, unsure whether or not he should talk about it. Soon, he resolves himself and slowly begins to speak. The story of the executioner called Hanabusa is long.

"But… It might sound cool to 'defeat evil with evil,' but in the end, it's still just *evil* ," I murmur.

Utsumi-san nods.

"More importantly… Is Shoutarou really there? And what do Hanabusa's butterfly maiden and sphenoid bones have to do with what happened to Sakurako-san's brother?"

"It's not just one thread. It's become a complicated web."

As always, Yamaji-san won't just say the important parts clearly.

"But now, Tatewaki-kun is tied up in those strings. Like a puppet."

A puppet… It sounds unpleasant. I don't know if it's the atmosphere in the car or because we've been driving so much, but I feel sick to my stomach. My cheeks and ears are burning with anxiety. I press my face against the car window to cool the scorching pain.

"Then you really think Shou-chan would commit a crime, Yamaji-san?"

I guess Utsumi-san still doesn't want to believe it. He and Yamaji-san start to argue with increasing hostility. Don't they realize that this isn't the time for fighting?

"I don't know about all this thread business, but what are they trying to accomplish? What do they get out of getting Shoutarou and Kujou-san involved?" I try desperately not to get emotional, but I can't keep my voice steady.

My words resound through the car. Yamaji-san looks at me through the rearview mirror. He opens his mouth for a second, then decides not to say it.

"What?"

"...Do you know anything about alchemy?"

“Huh?”

It’s a weird question, but that just so happens to be my area of expertise.

“It’s the technique to turn other materials into gold, or in a broader sense, the chemistry of creating life or souls. It’s an area of science that seeks to find the philosopher’s stone, and with it gain immortality and gold. Albertus Magnus, the scholar who discovered arsenic, and Paracelsus, the physician who invented laudanum - an opiate- are famous alchemists.”

Yamaji-san gives me a confused look upon hearing my reply.

“Wow... Goth Loli-chan… You know a lot…”

“Everyone should know at least that much.”

I still can’t remember math formulas, though.

“But nobody has discovered immortality. They also can’t bring the dead back to life, unlike Dr. Frankenstein.”

“So what?”

“So ‘they’ tried to imitate it. The disciples decided to create a fake that looks exactly like the real thing.”

“Like how Goya’s ‘The Colossus’ was really painted by his disciple, Asenio Juliá?”

No matter how beautiful the work is, the stray brushstrokes that Goya left on the painting prove that a fake can never be the real thing. A fake will always be a fake, no matter how hard you try to change that. Yamaji-san puts on a bitter smile.

“Your… Knowledge is admirable.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment? Or are you belittling me?”

“Learning is important, but there will come a day when your knowledge will betray you. It’s important to have faith. You need a strong conviction that won’t bend or break no matter what you throw at it. Living means you’ll eventually have to lose something, so you need to be able to move forward without hesitation, no matter what you lose,” Yamaji-san says.

But… is it wrong to waver? I reflexively look at Utsumi-san.

“I also think it’s better to be a little flexible than too rigid,” Utsumi-san says with a shrug.

Yamaji-san's brow is deeply wrinkled.

"But… they can't be flexible. They're fools who live only for loyalty with no beliefs of their own."

As Ambrose Bierce put it in The Devil's Dictionary, fidelity is "a trait peculiar to those who are about to be betrayed."

"That's why 'they' are trying to make a fake," he says.

So what is that fake? I don't have time to hear the rest, though. The car is about to reach its destination.

"I wonder where… Kotan Park…? No… Then it must be Kamuioohashi or the station building," Utsumi-san says as he watches the scenery flow by.

Visibility on the road by the riverside isn't very good because of all the plants and snow, but I manage to spot two cars parked in the parking lot next to the bridge.

"...Kujou-san's car isn't here," Utsumi-san mutters sadly.

There's definitely no brown car.

"..."

Once the car is parked next to the others, Utsumi-san's expression stiffens.

"...What should we do, Yamaji-san? Should I report this?"

"No… let's check out the situation first. If the police show up now, they might notice and escape."

They're saying weird stuff for police officers, so I look over at the car next to us. A thin layer of fluffy snow has started to accumulate on the white car next to us, whose windshield is broken with red blood dripping down to form several round puddles.

## Third Bone: Shoutarou Tatewaki's Case

### Part 1

When I was a child, I remember the crime prevention classes in school always telling us to "never get in a car with a stranger." But what should I do if I do know the person in the car? What if someone

you know is a criminal? Even a high school student like me would get into the car without a second thought. It was careless and stupid of me. I trusted Yoshimi Mizutani too much.

I brought her back from the brink of death with my own two hands. That doesn't give me the right to decide if she lives or dies, but I want her to live. And if possible, I want her to be happy, too. However, Yoshimi-san is gripping the steering wheel with an anxious, angry expression on her face. It feels like she's just barely keeping herself calm right now. If I make one misstep, she'll explode with rage. All I can do right now is do as she says in this perilous situation.

"…Where are we going?" I ask casually, while looking around.

"We're going to meet up with my collaborators."

"Your collaborators…?"

"There's a few things I need to do first."

A few things… I still don't know what her goal is.

"Who… Are they?" I ask nervously.

"I'm going to get my doll's head back," she answers firmly.

Her doll's head…? Why does she care so much about a doll's head?

"Is it… Something really special?"

"Yes, it is. They'll then kill the man who stole it."

"'They' as in your collaborators…? Aren't the ghosts supposed to make bad people kill other bad people?"

"Yes, that's right. I suppose they should call themselves 'specimen collectors' rather than 'ghosts'."

The term "specimen collectors" makes me think of Sakurako-san. It must just be a strange coincidence - or maybe it's fate.

Yoshimi-san seems to be tired of my barrage of questions. She lets out a short sigh and presses her lips together. There's silence for several minutes. What am I supposed to do? I wonder as I look at Yoshimi-san. I notice her hands are trembling as they grip the steering wheel.

"…Yoshimi-san… This really isn't right."

She seems genuinely frightened, too.

“My late grandma always told me not to do bad things. If you do, it’ll always come back to bite you one day.”

“So what? It’ll come back to bite you? Is that worse than the hell of living in an empty world where the person most important to you is gone?”

I’m racking my brain trying to think of some way to stop her, but my words aren’t getting through. This time, I take a breath. It’s impossible for me to do something about it right now while just talking in a car. Of course I’m not going to just give up. I’ll stay calm for now and wait for the right timing.

“…So right now, we’re… Going to meet up with the butterflies and kill someone…?”

“Yes, that’s right. The one being executed is a man who has been kidnapping and killing young children for a long time. The ones performing the execution are the siblings of those he murdered.”

“No… But are those people evil? Because…”

In other words, the family of the victims. People who lost their family because of a criminal… Just like Sakurako-san. I understand wanting revenge, I’ve seen how much Sakurako-san has been hurt. But those people are now being used as wicked pawns to act as perpetrators and destroy evil.

“Are those people… really evil?”

“Sometime in the next 10 years, both those people will get the blood of another on their hands. Especially since one of them was already on probation. After his sister died, the family fell apart. His mother was scammed out of a large amount of money while looking for her daughter, but now he scams people, and is involved in other criminal activity.”

“No…”

A victim of fraud became a perpetrator of fraud. Someone who knows the pain and hardship it causes turned to the side that steals from people… I’ve seen so many peoples’ lives and families destroyed as a result of different crimes. Someone who scams those victims is even more evil. But despair invokes further sins.

“…Where are we meeting?”

I suddenly realize I recognize the road we're on. A chill runs down my spine. I know this road like the back of my hand.

"Y-Yoshimi-san…?" I manage to squeeze the words out hoarsely.

Yoshimi-san curls the corners of her mouth slightly.

"Nagayama Shrine."

Part 2

Nagayama Shrine is the oldest shrine in the Kamikawa area, and is the most historically significant shrine in Asahikawa. The huge torii near the shrine have become part of my everyday life. I see them just as much as I see Sakurako-san. I've only been a handful of times. I've always wanted to visit it again, but I've never gotten around to it because I thought I'd be able to go whenever. I never thought I'd visit it like this…

As I pass through the torii with Yoshimi-san, I feel a strange sense of guilt. If I manage to make it through today without incident, I'll definitely come back here to pay my respects. I promise that to myself. My heart is racing.

The forecast said it wouldn't be too cold today, but I'm already freezing as soon as I get out of the car. It feels even colder than usual because the trees are bare during the winter, so the wind can reach in further.

I follow Yoshimi-san as she quickly makes her way into the shrine grounds. When we reach the pond, I see a man in his early 20s standing on the bridge. He looks cold. He keeps pulling the front of his bench coat closed, and he's stamping his feet. I'm not sure if he's trying to keep his toes from freezing, or if he's annoyed, though. The man is a bit thin, and he has a pointed chin. He has lots of ear piercings, which give him an aggressive look. This is the exact opposite of a friendly atmosphere. I can't bring myself to speak to him.

I look at Yoshimi-san as if to ask "who is he?"

She tilts her head to the side slightly. I guess she doesn't know the faces of the people we're here to meet. …Is this going to be okay?

As we approach, the young man notices us and gives us a knowing look. He seems to relax a bit when he sees us. Maybe he's nervous, too.

"Are you… Hoshi Chiba-kun?" Yoshimi-san lets out a relieved sigh and quickens her pace.

He nods silently and looks out at the pond.

"…A little boy died here… 7 years before Yuzuki died."

"Yes…" Yoshimi-san nods.

The man's expression is grim. He's talking about Soutarou-kun.

"Did you… really find the culprit?" Chiba-san asks in a slightly trembling voice.

It's probably due to anger, rather than the cold. Yoshimi-san's expression grows even more tense as she nods once again. I can feel her fear. Yoshimi-san isn't cruel and coldhearted enough for this… Honestly, I don't think she's suited for such a large-scale crime.

Both Yoshimi-san and Chiba-san seem to be feeling emotional. Are these two really capable of performing an "execution?" I don't want them to, of course.

"Who is the culprit…?"

I've been wondering that, too. There's a chance that they're related to what happened to Soutarou-kun.

"He's a 59 year old man who used to live near here."

"In this neighbourhood?!"

"Yeah. He's a pedophile who has been kidnapping and murdering children over the last 15 years since he became sexually impotent. He befriends them first. He likes his little friends, too. But when the children show any fear or resistance, he immediately becomes enraged, and can't help himself anymore."

"Wha…"

I'm horrified. What a heavy story. Chiba-san isn't hiding his anger at all.

"He's been arrested several times for crimes other than theft, robbery, and murder. That's why he hasn't committed any crimes for the last few years."

“But what does that have to do with a Butterfly Maiden’s head?” I can’t help but ask. I want to know how Yoshimi-san and the others are involved with the culprit.

“During his third time in prison, he heard about a good way to earn money: Butterfly Maidens. They weren’t originally intended to get into the hands of the public. But when the doll maker passed away, her family put everything up for sale. All the specimen collectors were desperate to get them back - including my sister.”

Yoshimi-san says that when she finally got her hands on one she left it with her mother, but it was stolen.

“After learning that the Butterfly Maidens could make him money while in prison, the culprit paid a small fortune to have someone collect them for him. That’s An’s uncle. He’s always part of that man’s schemes.”

The man used An’s uncle to take the head off of Kiyomi-san’s mother’s doll. It was a doll that Kiyomi-san got back originally, and Yoshimi-san was supposed to protect it if anything happened to her. Kiyomi-san’s mother also took her own life in front of the doll, though it’s not clear if it’s because the head was stolen or not. I understand that they’re very special dolls that can even influence a person’s life, but…

“The doll’s head could be sold to a specimen collector for a lot of money. If he sold it to another collector, I might never get it back. I’ll do whatever it takes to get the head back. That’s how I’ll get my revenge on him,” Yoshimi-san says.

“And I can do whatever I want to him, right?” Chiba-san says, smiling slightly.

“I don’t care what you do to him, as long as I get the  head back first,” Yoshimi-san replies, looking nervous as always.

I still get the feeling that she’s holding back her fear. I want to say that if she’s scared, she shouldn’t have gotten herself into this, but I can’t. It would only add fuel to the fire. I tell myself that I have to stay calm.

“Let’s get going, then. We don’t have a lot of time.” Yoshimi-san urges Chiba-san and I to start walking.

“Is Chiba-san the only other person coming?” I ask hurriedly.

Yoshimi-san nods.

“There’s one other person joining us later, but this is everyone for now. Hurry up and move,” Yoshimi-san says. “There’s no reason to stay here any longer.”

“Where are we going?”

“Asahiyama Zoo.”

“What? Why there?!”

I can’t help but raise my voice a bit. A man who seems to work at the shrine looks surprised to hear me. He watches us suspiciously from a short distance away, so I bow my head at him. Right, we’re still at a shrine. It’s not the kind of place you should speak loudly at.

“Asahiyama… It closes early in winter, so we have to hurry up…” I say to Yoshimi-san, quieter this time.

She nods and starts walking.

“The zoo? Really?” Chiba-san says, sounding a bit displeased. He walks a few steps in front of me, right behind Yoshimi-san.

I’m torn. I could escape from them right now. I could run to the shrine and ask the priest for help, but what would those two do? Would they still get their revenge together? If I broke my promise and got on the bad side of the specimen collectors and the ghosts, they might hurt Sakurako-san. Also, I’d like to hear more about the culprit Yoshimi-san was talking about earlier. He could really be related to Soutarou-kun’s case…

Yoshimi-san notices  I stopped walking during a moment of hesitation. She turns around to look at me, so I quickly start following her again. I have to be careful and wait for my chance. Right now is… definitely not the time.

After we return to the car, Yoshimi-san silently turns up the heat. She’s probably worried about Chiba-san, since he was waiting outside.

“There’s a fleece sweater over there that you can use if you need to,” she says to Chiba-san, who’s in the back seat.

Even though she pretends to be indifferent, I think Yoshimi-san is actually a kind person. I wonder if Yoshimi-san’s life has changed due to Kiyomi-san’s influence, just like how meeting Sakurako-san

caused my career path to change. But it should also be your own choice. I don't just blindly follow Sakurako-san. Meeting her has changed the way I view things, and let me step foot into a new world, but it's from those experiences that I made my own decision. The same goes for Yoshimi-san. She chose to be with Kiyomi-san. Even if it means tossing herself aside. I don't want to look down on that choice.

"Yeah, it's cold, isn't it? You'd better warm up. Do you want the heat turned up a bit more? I could run to the convenience store to get you a warm drink, if you want?" I ask Chiba-san in Yoshimi-san's place.

"Huh? Uh… No, it's… I'm fine…"

"Are your legs cold? You can have this."

I never know when Sakurako-san is going to want to "play outside," so I always keep some spare pocket warmers in my bag. Chiba-san looks perplexed as he takes the one I'm handing to him. He hesitates like he wants to say something, but in the end he starts rubbing it between his hands to heat it up.

It takes about 15 minutes to get from Nagayama shrine to the Asahiyama Zoo by car, even considering the bad road conditions. We might get there before the pocket heater warms up. I glance at the clock, and notice it's almost 2pm.

"…Is that man really the culprit?"

"That's what I heard, at least."

Chiba-san glance at each other, neither of us sure how reliable that is.

"I trust the person who told me about him. They were my sister's friend, and they helped me out a lot even after my sister died," Yoshimi-san says, glancing at me.

There's no need to lie to Chiba-san about this. Chiba-san is definitely a butterfly. He's doomed to be deceived by the specimen collectors, mangled by his crimes, and ultimately destroy himself. But if that man really did kill those children, I think he should pay for his crimes.

Maybe Soutarou-kun has something to do with it. The incident was already considered an accident as soon as it was reported. Is it

possible to extract enough evidence to build a case when the children have already been cremated? I don't know how much of it would stick, and there's no guarantee that he won't hurt more kids. Sakurako-san told me before that sex crimes aren't a matter of cognitive distortion or moral values, the offender just keeps making the same mistake. In that case…

But I still think vigilantism is wrong. I still remember Kobamatsu-san , who couldn't forgive the crimes of another, and ended up committing the same crime. The fist that swings for justice hurts not only the other person, but yourself as well. But if he really is the person who killed Soutarou-kun, then Sakurako-san might lose control of herself when she finds out. That's what I fear the most. I want to protect Sakurako-san, no matter what. I won't let the ghosts do as they please. I steel myself, and grab my phone.

"What do you think you're doing? Turn it off right now," Yoshimi-san immediately says in a stern voice.

"I had plans to go to a Christmas party today. If I don't tell my friends and mom, they'll worry. They might go looking for me. You don't want that, do you?"

She has no choice but to agree to let me use it. I don't have enough time to write out all the details, or tell a lot of people. I can't decide who would be best right away, so I end up sending my message to only one person - Shitara-sensei.

"I may have found the person who killed Soutarou-kun. I'm going after him right now. If… If something happens, and I can't stay by Sakurako-san's side anymore, then… Please, Sensei. Keep Sakurako-san in this world. Don't let her fly off somewhere else… She's not a monster, or a butterfly. She's a human."

After sending that message, I turn  my phone off. If I try to do anything more, I could be in danger if someone tries to contact me. I don't want to accidentally drag someone else into this, either. From this point onward, it's up to me.

I put my phone in my bag, take a deep breath, and look out at the scenery passing by through the car window. We're driving down

the road next to where my grandma is buried. I wonder what my grandma would think of me right now. Would she be angry?

When I see the blue sign with the words “Asahiyama Zoo,” I steel myself and straighten up in my seat. Even if I get scolded, I can’t turn back now.

Winter is the best time to go to Asahiyama Zoo. There’s penguin walks, the animals are more active than in summer, and all the animals are more fluffy, round, and cute. Visiting in the summer is nice, but I love coming here in the winter.

I never wanted to go to Nagayama shrine or the zoo in order to commit a crime like this, though. It’s supposed to be a place to make fun memories with your friends, family, and loved ones while learning what it really means to “live” through the animals. I feel guilt rising up inside me. We just barged in and we’re about to hurt someone.

“Yoshimi-san… Is this really the place?”

“Yeah.”

“…”

I hope we don’t cause any trouble for the zoo. I’m so sorry, Sawa-san. I don’t even want to do anything that’ll hurt someone in the first place. Especially today, since there’s so many families here because of the Christmas holidays. The last thing I want to do is cause major trouble in this peaceful, Christmas-themed zoo.

“So… What are we doing here? Please just tell me already.”

“Right. I need your help. I want you to steal one of the items on display.”

“Me? An item on display?”

I’m confused by suddenly being asked for my cooperation. It’s more of an order than a request, though. I don’t feel like I’m allowed to say no. But… Stealing something, huh?

“Is that a problem? …Would you rather have a different job?” Yoshimi-san asks me with a telling glare.

“…”

Well, I guess it’s better than hurting someone, or something like that, but why do they want me to do that…? Regardless, this is a

promise I made to the ghosts. A promise that will protect Sakurako-san.

“Okay. What should I steal, and from where…?”

“The animal materials exhibit has a special Christmas event going on. There should be some dolls set out, and one of them will be a butterfly maiden. I want you to steal that doll’s head.”

“No way!”

Beheading a doll… That’s not just stealing, it’s grotesque.

“You don’t have any choice in the matter. I already told the culprit that I would give her two doll heads in exchange for the head of my sister’s doll. I already have one head, so I need you to get the other one.”

“But…”

“If you don’t steal it, another specimen collector will do it. Don’t worry about it.”

She sounds pushy, telling me not to worry, but I can’t see any way out of it. It’s better than being forced to do something even scarier, too, though I don’t think there’s such a thing as a good or a bad crime. I have no choice but to follow their orders. I head up the hill without looking at any of the animals, and go straight to the animal materials exhibit.

As I walk, I wonder about how I came to be in this situation. What caused this to happen? Where did it start? I always thought I was just a normal, boring person who would live out his whole life without any individuality. Now, I don’t feel any disgust when I see a gruesome corpse. All I feel is a strong desire to find out how they died, and to clear up any regrets they might have.

That day, I was captivated by the woman I saw walking along the beautiful path leading to Nagayama Shrine. Did this happen because of all the corpses, victims, perpetrators, and bereaved families I’vet met? Or is it because I was named Shoutarou after my great grandfather, which just happens to sound like Soutarou? Is it all because a boy who happened to resemble me died an untimely death?

The wind blows past me, bringing fluffy snowflakes with it. For a moment, they look like the wings of a white butterfly. A butterfly

flapping its wings in Beijing can cause a storm in New York a month later - that's what they say about the butterfly effect. Just like a butterfly's tiny wings flapping can cause a huge event somewhere far away, people never know what choices they make will cause something to shift in their lives.

Sometimes, I wish we'd never met. There's times where I think that if I knew it was going to be this painful, I wouldn't have chosen the life I've led. But at the same time, if I'd continued to live an ordinary life, how many times would I have the self confidence and conviction to know that "only I can do this."

Right now, at least, I know that I'm the only one who can do this. That's why I'm here, at one of my favourite places, about to commit a crime. Is this what they mean to return a favour with spite? I feel sick from the guilt. I might be caught stealing, but even if I get away with it, I'm not sure I'll be able to come here again. Will there be a way for me to atone someday? Next time I come here, I just want to enjoy it. I don't know if I'll be able to, though. I'd like to come with Sakurako-san, too. Together. Just the two of us.

Before I realize it, the animal materials exhibit is right in front of me. The exhibition hall on the first floor is probably Sakurako-san's favourite place in the whole zoo. The room has skeletons and taxidermy animals that used to live at the zoo. There's over 100 of them.

It looks like the butterfly maiden is on the second floor, at the animal library. They're holding a Christmas event today, so they have dolls on display, and holding picture book readings. It seems like the event just ended, since there's a crowd of parents and children leaving the building, all chatting away. Good. I wanted to avoid doing this before or during the event, since there would be too many people. Now we just have to wait until there's nobody left inside, then head for the doll…

We enter the building once the crowd has dispersed. Chiba-san says that he'll keep watch in case someone comes in. He stays by the entrance on the first floor. Yoshimi-san and I head up to the second floor. I have a faint hope that the doll will turn out to be a

fake, or the exhibit will turn out to be different. I know that it won't happen, though.

"…What?"

When we reach the dolls, it's different from what I imagined.

"But… No… Why?" Yoshimi-san cries when she realizes that something is wrong.

She said it herself earlier. If we don't steal it, someone else will. But still… I didn't think it'd really happen. The Butterfly Maiden on display is already missing her head.

"W-what should we do? Why did this—" I start to say, but someone suddenly touches my shoulder.

"This isn't right, you'll have to apologize to Sawa-san later. At the same time, there's a shameful lack of crime prevention measures."

Hearing that voice floods my chest with both relief and despair.

"Don't you think so, Boy?" Sakurako-san smiles fearlessly.

Part 3

"But why are you…?"

Nobody's presence makes me feel relieved like Sakurako-san does, but just for today, I wish she'd stayed away. Right now that familiar smile is making me feel awful.

"Didn't I say at the beginning that the executioners are the siblings of the victims? She's the second one." Yoshimi-san holds out her hand to Sakurako-san with a relieved smile.

"Honestly, I was surprised when I got that message from you. Perfect timing, though. I was coming here anyway today to deliver a specimen."

Sakurako-san hands Yoshimi-san a paper bag with the Asahiyama Zoo's logo on it. It says "For our only planet. For all of its life," next to the silhouette of a wolf. For the sake of every life on the only Earth there is. I feel a stinging in my chest. For every life. Every single one.

"…Well, let's go back to the car. No need to hang around here," Yoshimi-san says, sounding satisfied after looking inside the bag.

"Where are we going?"

“Kamuikotan,” Yoshimi-san answers Sakurako-san’s question shortly.

“Kamuikotan, huh? Not the kind of place you normally go in the winter.”

“We don’t want to meet this person in a crowded place. Whatever, let’s just go,” Yoshimi-san urges us.

She wants to get out of here as soon as possible. I do, too.

I give the passenger seat to Chiba-san, and sit in the back seat with Sakurako-san. Since it’s a compact kei car, I’m closer to her than usual. Every time the car shakes on the bumpy winter road, our knees and shoulders touch. Under normal circumstances I might have been happy about it, but today every time I feel her body heat I just feel impatience, anger, and despair.

“Why… Are you here?”

She just shrugs her shoulders.

“Just like him, she’s had her family stolen by that man. She has the right to get revenge,” Yoshimi-san answers instead of Sakurako-san.

I wanted to take her place to keep her away from crime, but now that’s meaningless. What’s the point of my resolve to keep my promise?

Sakurako-san has the same cool expression that she always has. She doesn’t know how I’m feeling at all. This is how it always goes. She never understands how I’m feeling. Sakurako-san showing up has made it even harder for me to find a chance to escape, but maybe it was impossible from the beginning. At this point, there’s nothing I can do about it. I have to protect Sakurako-san, no matter what.

Kamuikotan is a valley to the west of Asahikawa. It’s a beautiful place, and is considered one of the top 8 most picturesque spots in Asahikawa. The name comes from the Ainu language, meaning “a place where gods dwell.” It’s not because of the beautiful scenery, though. The complex, fast flow of the Ishikari River, which can get over 70 meters deep at some parts, has claimed the lives of countless people who have tried to cross it while carrying heavy

cargo. It's a place where evil gods reside. It also happens to be one of the most famously haunted spots in Hokkaido.

Looking at beautiful scenery and thinking about paranormal experiences make me think of summer, so it feels out of place going there in the cold. It's not somewhere I would want to go in winter, especially since it's dangerous. It's been a while since I've been on such an unexciting drive.

"But… The sun is about to set, so why are we going somewhere so cold…? I get that you're avoiding crowded places, but couldn't it be somewhere else?"

"This river was once thought to have an evil god living in it that sank ships. It's revenge for the kids. It's a fitting place to hide his body."

So they're planning on putting his body in the river… So that's how they're hoping to get away with it? I look over at Sakurako-san. She looks calm. She isn't denying any of it.

"…Even killing him 100 times wouldn't be enough," Chiba-san mutters in a terrifyingly dark voice.

"Have you lost someone from your family, too?"

"My little sister. It wasn't just my sister, though," he mutters loathingly. "…I thought it was strange. It's highly unlikely that Yuzuki fell into the river. I do know that she wanted to come with me, and followed after me when I left."

Sakurako-san's expression grows stern as she listens to Chiba-san's story.

"I'm the one who told her she can't come, and to go back home. I should have walked her home, but I just left her on the bridge," he says, adding that he usually walks her home.

Chiba-san was a lot older than his sister, and found her cute. Of course they sometimes got annoyed by each other, and fought often, but she was still his precious baby sister.

"I had plans with a friend that day, so I was in a hurry. So I left her there. It was near the river, but I never thought she'd fall while crossing the bridge. I always told her never to cross the bridge alone to keep her safe."

It’s a busy road. She has a promise with her family to always hold her brother’s hand, or another adult’s, while crossing, just in case something happens. But that was the last time Chiba-san saw his sister.

“Whether she fell into the river, or if she was kidnapped, nothing would have happened if I had taken her home properly… I know that.”

“But it wasn’t only my sister,” he mutters.

“That may be true, but… If the culprit was involved, then it’s 100% his fault, not yours.”

That’s right. Just because Sakurako-san didn’t take her little brother on her walk that day doesn’t mean his death was her fault. Chiba-san, who had a pained look on his face until now, suddenly bursts into laughter.

“What?”

I have no idea what’s so funny. Not even the slightest inkling. Yet he keeps cackling like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever heard - and then he suddenly goes silent.

“ It’s  the culprit’s fault? As if. The world is full of bad people. It’s the fault of whoever let their guard down. They’re an idiot who got fooled. Whatever happens to an idiot is their own fault,” he says as if his words are filthy.

When he says, “idiot,” he makes it sound filthier than anything I’ve heard in my life.

“You know what? It’s our parents’ fault for letting their little girl get into a situation where an accident could occur. It’s the same as abuse. Wouldn’t you say she was being neglected? That her parents are the ones who really killed her? Everyone else says so. Even my father said that my mother, grandmother, and I killed Yuzuki.”

Sakurako-san silently stares out the window with no expression on her face. When Chiba-san says the words, “killed her,” Sakurako-san slowly blinks.

“Facts don’t matter. Society considers the victims to be in the wrong, not the perpetrator. When someone is tricked by a conman, it’s their own fault for being fooled, because they’re an idiot.”

That word sounds disgusting. I decide that I'll never use it again.

"Are… You a conman?" Yoshimi-san asks in a slightly lower tone.

"I'm not, I just withdraw the cash after the scam. I'm still an errand boy. A stupid kid who didn't even graduate middle school could never do anything big. In the end, I was caught and put on probation. There was no helping it, since I'm an idiot," he says. "I got what was coming to me."

Even if I gave him the benefit of doubt and said he was an idiot, I still don't see how he brought it upon himself.

"You really are an 'idiot,'" Sakurako-san says as she continues to stare out the window. "Part of what you said is true. But you've assigned a lot of different meanings to the word 'idiot' - ignorance, weakness, naivety, and helplessness. I disagree with your hasty and forced conclusion that 'idiot = bad.'"

"Oh, really? I'm just stupid, then? It was inevitable since I didn't have the money to pay for cram school, or go to high school. Get it? All the money was taken by con men. Even my father abandoned me. It's all because it was my fault Yuzuki died."

"But… If you know how much hardship it causes, why did you become a con artist?" I can't help but ask.

"So what?! Being weak is a sin. The weak get sucked in, and that's the end of it. It's the weak person's fault! It's their fault they got fooled! Idiots like that don't even deserve to live!"

Chiba-san's foul words echo through the car. Yoshimi-san and Sakurako-san are silent. No one affirms what he said.

"But still, I… No, that's the reason why I want to say this. 'It's the culprit who's at fault.' At the very least, you didn't do anything wrong in the incident with your little sister, Chiba-san."

That alone cannot be changed.

"And the scammer who deceived your mother is at fault. Not your mother."

Sakurako-san wasn't at fault, either. While I do pity his circumstances, I don't think it's right that Chiba-san is now scamming

other people. It's another sin. I know that by saying that, I risk Chiba-san becoming even more agitated, but still, I felt like I had to say it.

"…You're right. The person most at fault is the one who killed Yuzuki," Chiba-san says softly after a moment of silence. "This whole time… I've been thinking that there's no way she fell into the river. No one in my family believed it was an accident except my father."

"So then—"

"But no matter what I do, Yuzuki will never come back!" Chiba-san's shouts echo again. "Yuzuki won't come back. The money that was taken from the family, my father, my career path I was supposed to follow, everything. All our friends and relatives think we killed Yuzuki, and won't give us a chance. Listen, the world blames the mother for her child's death more than the person who killed them."

Sakurako-san casts down her eyes.

"Isn't that messed up? In today's world taking your eyes off of your child for just a moment is a greater crime than killing the child and throwing them into a river," Chiba-san says as his eyes fill with tears.

His uncontrollable anger, his directionless hatred, the absurdity of having no choice but to hate himself… It stabs me in the chest. I don't know what more I can say. I really don't want to criticize him. I don't want to think that we live in a society where it's normal to blame the family left behind.

"But… It's okay now."

"Hm?"

Chiba-san lets out a sigh of relief.

"Finally… It's finally happening. I can get my revenge."

"Chiba-san…"

"I'll kill the man that did that. I've wanted to kill him for so long. I'll make him suffer many times worse than Yuzuki did, and throw him into a river…"

That dark, monotone voice chills and crushes my heart more than any shouting. It's just sad. Tears well up in my eyes.

"Revenge is a mistake."

Two years ago, I could have said that confidently, but I can't say those words anymore. I just want the people burning with hatred right in front of me to be saved somehow.

"But… Is that person really, truly the culprit?"

Sakurako-san and I have already been fooled by a ghost before. Honestly, I don't think that this person we're about to meet is the real culprit.

"Is there any proof that he killed Soutarou-kun and Yuzuki-san?"

"Well… The information came from someone I trust… But we should check with him when we get there," Yoshimi-san says with her eyebrows wrinkled.

"And you think he'll actually tell you?" Sakurako-san asks coldly.

"He might tell me, since I have the 'head,'" Yoshimi-san says with a small laugh. "There are people out there who would pay millions for this. Even if we're not cops, I'm sure he has a guilty conscience. He won't be boasting about his crimes, but if it means making a lot of money, he might be willing to talk, so don't say anything until we've made the exchange. After that, you can do whatever you want."

"Is there anything we should do other than toss him in the river?" Chiba-san laughs happily.

I don't want to listen to this anymore, so I turn my attention to the scenery out the window. At that same moment, the car enters a tunnel. I can see Sakurako-san reflected in the glass.

"Is that okay with you?" Yoshimi-san asks Sakurako-san.

"If you get in my way, I'll kill you, too," Chiba-san says.

"…"

"You always look so calm and composed, but you hate him too, right?"

Chiba-san huffs when he doesn't get a response from Sakurako-san.

"I do hate the culprit. I never knew that hatred and anger could make your blood boil like this. It feels as hot as fire and as cold as liquid nitrogen."

Her words remind me of the rage she felt toward the person she thought was the culprit before. I feel an indescribable irritation. I want to grab her hand and jump out of the car right now.

"…But I don't think killing him will be the end of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Is it true that revenge tastes as sweet as honey? Even if you kill him, your life won't change. All it does is put you at risk of being arrested for murder. Nothing will come from what we've lost, even if we sacrifice something more. It's different from a broken bone, it won't heal. If you lose a bone, you'll never get it back, no matter how much time passes."

Chiba-san laughs at Sakurako-san.

"That's fine by me. I don't care if I get caught, as long as I get to kill him. I'll just have to get used to a different daily routine, right? Do you think it's okay to let the killer live? Aren't you angry? Don't you hate him?!"

Sakurako-san frowns at his questions.

"Rather than revenge… We should be asking if he's likely to reoffend. Another child may be targeted. Of course it isn't uncommon for the ages of the victims to increase as the culprit ages, but it's also true that elderly people are statistically more likely to commit sex crimes against children. It takes physical strength and stamina to attack a young, healthy opponent. Statistics show that approximately 70% of repeat offenders are sex offenders."

Sakurako-san takes a deep breath, crosses her legs, and tents her fingers as she thinks.

"Sex crimes in particular are highly rewarding, just like sweets. Something bad happened today, so I'll attack a child to treat myself… or something like that. They think it's okay as long as they have a reason to justify it. Because they were standing close enough to grab, because they didn't resist when you touched them, because you were drunk… it's all okay, the other person's intentions and the law don't matter."

"…"

I feel sick from hearing that. Even Chiba-san has a look of overwhelming disgust on his face.

“It’s a kind of crime that seems abnormal to you because you can’t relate to it.  If that man really is the culprit, the root of his criminal impulse is sexual, and he killed the children, then there’s an undeniable possibility that he’ll reoffend. He’s a heartless man who killed children out of desire and self-preservation, so he’ll probably do it again if the timing is right.”

“Then our only choice is to kill him,” Chiba-san mutters with conviction. “I’ll kill him myself. The number one thing I want to do with my life is kill the person who killed Yuzuki. I don’t care about what happens next. Once he’s dead, my life might as well be over. I’m glad that this didn’t happen the other way around. I feel sorry that Yuzuki died, but if she had lived and I died, she would have suffered a lot worse than I have. I’m glad it was me. I’ll kill him,” he says reassuringly.

“…You’re too young to talk about life,” Sakurako-san mutters.

If Soutarou-kun were still alive, he would be about the same age as Chiba-san.

“This is surprising. I thought you’d be angrier. I heard that you tried to kill a man before,” Yoshimi-san says with a curious expression.

“That’s true… I suppose I won’t know how I’ll feel until the moment comes. The one thing I can say is that all the pain is my own. All the anger and sadness, all of these emotions are mine. I don’t want anyone to sympathize with me, or try to understand me. All of this is mine.”

Her pain is only for her. It sounds like she’s rejecting me. Anxiety climbs through my chest.

As we drive along national highway 12, the word “Kamuikotan” finally appears. We turn right at the sign. We’re almost at our destination.

“Tell everyone that I killed him,” Chiba-san suddenly says. “…If the police find out, you can say you tried to stop me. If you think it’s too dangerous, it’s fine for you to run away. I won’t blame you. Just don’t try to get in my way.”

Sakurako-san wrinkles her brow for a moment, just as she was starting to look like she’d resolved herself.

“Sakurako-san…”

I grab her hand suddenly. I just want to hold onto something. I don’t want to let her go, but she gently pulls her hand away. I feel like I’ll regret not keeping hold of her one day, but right now it feels like I’m forbidden from touching her.

Part 4

The meeting place is at the bridge, not too far from the parking lot. There’s nobody else here, so our car is the only one in there.

“It’s cold,” Chiba-san mutters, asking for the heat to be turned up.

“It’s because of your autonomic nervous system. Nervousness gives you chills. Your heart rate increases and your blood vessels constrict causing you to experience cold sweat and shivers. Your body feels uneasy.”

“Does it make your nose run, too?” Chiba-san asks with a puzzled expression as he sniffles.

Sakurako-san is cool headed as always.

“It could be vasomotor rhinitis. Temperature changes can cause temporary symptoms of allergic rhinitis. It can also develop in times of stress. Well, I can’t deny the possibility that you have a simple cold… Oh, did you know that humans catch colds far more easily than dogs, even though we’re both mammals?”

Even though we’re in a literal life or death situation, she just does everything her own way.

“Humans as a species have a failed mucus drainage system under the sphenoid sinus. Since the maxillary sinus is positioned high up, drainage has to occur against gravity. Since we accumulate mucus much more easily than dogs, we’re more prone to bacteria, viruses, and inflammation.”

I don’t want to hear about this. About getting sick easier than dogs.

“Oh, but it’s not that unusual. Vertebrates have inverted retinas, and humans struggle with childbirth because their heads are too big. There’s a lot of other design issues. But despite it all, humans

stubbornly continue to survive. That's life. And so, we persist," Sakurako-san says enthusiastically.

For a moment, Chiba-san opens his mouth like he's about to say something. Suddenly, he looks frail. But the next moment, we see a white car.

"…If I push that thing into the river, he'll die quick and easy," Chiba-san spits.

We slowly bring the car over and park next to it. In the driver's seat is an old man, alone. No, I think he looks older than he actually is. The man gets out of his car. Yoshimi-san gulps loudly. She's scared. Still, she bravely takes a deep breath, and also gets out of her car.

The man's dirty clothes, greasy hair, uneven teeth, goggly eyes, and sunken cheeks make him give off a creepy air. I'm worried about Yoshimi-san facing him alone. I was told not to get out of the car, so I at least unfasten my seatbelt, just in case something happens. Chiba-san is bouncing his leg so violently that I can feel the shaking in the backseat. Sakurako-san folds her arms and watches the two outside. I'm so nervous that I forgot to breathe. I only noticed because it was starting to hurt.

The conversation between the man and Yoshimi-san doesn't seem to be going well. I can see Yoshimi-san frowning for a moment.

"What should we do?" I ask Sakurako-san.

At that same moment, the car shakes as Chiba-san jumps out.

"W… Chiba-san?!"

Before anyone can stop him, Chiba-san attacks the man. He's holding a metal baseball bat. The impact makes a tremendous clanging noise.

"Ah…"

When I get out of the car, I see the man trembling next to a broken windshield.

"Wait! Stop! I haven't gotten the doll head yet!" Yoshimi-san shouts.

"Shut up! Let me kill him already!" Chiba-san's angry voice echoes through the valley.

"W-what's with him?! This car is a rental!" The man screams.

“This is awful. Was  I like this, too?” Sakurako-san calmly mutters to herself.

“It’s dangerous, so please stay in the car.”

It’s not really the right time to be saying this, but I’m glad that Sakurako-san is staying calm despite being face to face with the culprit.

“ Aaaah !” Chiba-san yells again and raises the bat over his head.

The man panics and falls into the pile of snow next to the parking lot. He doesn’t manage to escape in time. I hear a dull sound as the bat grazes his head.

“Eek!”

Yoshimi-san bravely tries to stop Chiba-san by grabbing onto his back. He manages to shake her off, sending her into the snow pile.

“Please calm down! What if it’s not him?!”

“Shut up! It doesn’t matter!”

“Yes, it does! What if you let him die, and then never find the real culprit!? What if you miss your chance at revenge?!”

“Ah…”

He seems to finally come to his senses, and lowers the bat.

“It looks like he has a concussion,” Sakurako-san says while she looks at the man. She got out of the car without me noticing.

“It’s just as Shoutarou said. We can’t be sure that this man is the culprit yet. He could be a fake.”

“…If I just keep killing them all, I’ll get the right one eventually,” Chiba-san replies in a low voice. He hasn’t given up yet.

“You might never get to the real one, though. Once we’ve confirmed that he’s the right culprit, you can do whatever you want with him. It’s too early to tell right now,” Sakurako-san says as she picks the man up.

“…What should we do?” Yoshimi-san asks, frowning. It looks like she cut her hand on a piece of glass.

“We have no choice but to put him in the car. Do you have anything to restrain him with?”

“Yes, there’s plastic tape in the car.” Yoshimi-san points at a small suitcase. Blood drips from her hand.

“Boys, tie this man up and put him in the car. Yoshimi, we need to treat your wound.”

“…Who put you in charge?” Chiba-san voices his displeasure with Sakurako-san’s orders.

“I just don’t want this to fail. You all are too unreliable.”

Chiba-san wrinkles his nose and looks even more displeased, but he doesn’t object. We tightly bind  the man’s hands and feet with the plastic tape, then put him in the backseat of the car he drove. Meanwhile, Sakurako-san treats Yoshimi-san’s wound using the first aid kit Yoshimi-san had in her car.

“At any rate, killing him here would leave too much evidence,” Sakurako-san says after examining the man’s head once she finishes treating Yoshimi-san.

The area where he was struck is swollen, and bleeding slightly.

“The autopsy will clearly show that the attacker used a blunt weapon. Not only are there glass fragments at the scene, but traces of Yoshimi-san’s blood are all over the place.”

“…”

Outside the car, Chiba-san is hanging his head like he’s being scolded.

“Should we ice the area he got hit?” Yoshimi-san asks.

“You’re right… Hopefully he doesn’t have any underlying conditions, but it’d be wise to cool the area,” Sakurako-san says, pointing at her bag that she left in Yoshimi-san’s car.

She pulls out a plastic bag that she uses for picking up dead animals, and fills it with snow.

“Ugh…”

The cold sensation woke the man up.

“…What’s going on?”

He manages to choke out weakly. Tied up in the back seat and being watched by all of us, he seems to have given up.

“I just want to confirm your past crimes,” Sakurako-san answers.

“Will you kill me if I tell you?”

“I don’t know, but there’s someone here who won’t forgive you even if you don’t talk… As it is, the result will be the same.”

The car’s glass is broken. The sun is going to set soon. If we abandoned him in such a desolate place, he could freeze to death.

“…What do you want to know?” He says with a deep sigh.

“It’s about the children you kidnapped and murdered in the past.”

The man suddenly starts to laugh at Sakurako-san’s words.

“What’s so funny?”

“Kidnapping doesn’t make money. It’s too risky.”

“What if you weren’t doing it for the money?”

“Why would I kidnap some brat if I wasn’t getting paid?” The man sounds surprised.

We all look at each other.

“…We heard you were a pedophile,” Yoshimi-san says in a trembling voice. She tells him about the crime she heard he did, which makes the man laugh again.

“Why don’t you try pulling your pants down and see if I can get it up, lady,” the man says. He rocks his hips lewdly.

Yoshimi-san immediately turns her head away.

“…You guys were tricked. If I’m going to kill someone, it’s to make myself rich. I wouldn’t kill a kid without a payday.”

“No… You’re lying...” Yoshimi-san can’t hide her bewilderment. Her voice is trembling, and she’s reluctantly shaking her head.

Sakurako-san and I both let out a sigh. It’s half resignation, and half relief. We both thought this might happen. The one person who won’t give up is Chiba-san.

“Are you kidding me? Is that true?”

“Hm?”

“You knew this whole time, didn’t you?! You’ve been lying to me?!” The flood of emotions and rage makes Chiba-san start yelling.

“Chiba-san!”

He grabs Yoshimi-san’s throat.

“Well?! Tell me! You were lying to me! You’ve just been messing with me!!” He yells while shaking Yoshimi-san.

“Chiba-san, please calm down! We can-“

“Shut up already! You’re interrupting me!”

I frantically try to stop him, but Sakurako-san brushes me aside.

“We don’t know how much of your story we can trust. At the very least, we want to know why you were chosen to be here,” Sakurako-san calmly tells the man.

“…I don’t know anything about it.”

“Why do you need money so badly? Why do you want to sell the doll head?”

“Is there anyone who doesn’t need money?”

“You already knew that this was going to be a shady deal. You stayed calm, even after getting hit, so you must have already been prepared to get injured. I’ll ask you again, why are you so desperate for money?”

The man looks troubled by the question for a while, then sighs as if he’s given up.

“…For my daughter.”

“You have a daughter?”

“She has a bad taste in men, just like her mother… She’s living with a man who beats her and their child. Even if she wanted to run away, she doesn’t have the cash.” He adds that his daughter is also pregnant right now. “It’s not easy to do on your own. I haven’t done anything fatherly for her, so I wanted to at least do this much…” He says in a self-deprecating way.

His bad breath and body odour fill the air.

“Really?”

“Too bad for you guys.”

He holds his hip out for Sakurako-san to take his phone out of his pocket. It’s an outdated flip phone. The wallpaper is set to a picture of a young woman holding a child. Yoshimi-san lets out a long sigh of disappointment.

“…Do you guys actually believe him!? He could have made all of that up!” Chiba-san shouts. He hasn’t given up yet.

“A child’s sense of smell shouldn’t be underestimated,” Sakurako-san says flatly. “Boy, what was your first impression when you saw this man? Be honest.”

“What?”

“Be blunt and clear. Just say what you felt.”

“…”

It’s hard to talk about that in front of the person himself. I’m hesitant, but Sakurako-san urges me to speak.

“…I was kind of scared. I know it’s not good to judge people by their appearance, but…”

I have no choice but to say it. I thought it might be too abstract, but Sakurako-san smiles.

“Yes, that’s right. I know that Soutarou was a cautious boy. He wouldn’t approach this man who gave him a weird feeling. There’s no way a young child would feel any different from how you felt.”

“Oh…”

“This man would also stand out if he were to approach a child. People around him would be wary, as well as the child. To put it simply, a child wouldn’t just follow him.”

“But… what if they were forced into the car?”

A small child like Soutarou-kun would be easy to pick up.

“That’s true. A car is a moving locked room. But would you really kidnap a child in a situation where if anyone saw you, they’d immediately call the police? You can’t just ignore the risks when you commit a crime. Unless they’re extremely impulsive, of course. The killer must have chosen his victim after carefully watching them. Before you can commit a crime, there has to be a situation that’ll make it possible to do,” Sakurako-san says all at once. She takes a deep breath, then gently smiles. “I don’t believe this man is the culprit behind those incidents.”

“You’re such an arrogant know-it-all…” Unable to believe her—no, refusing to believe her, Chiba-san glares at Sakurako-san.

“Shut up. I know magnitudes more about crime than you do,” Sakurako-san says decisively.

“While you’ve been denying your own weakness, hating and trying to get revenge on society, I’ve been studying crime. Why people commit crimes, how they kill others, what causes someone to die… I’m quite passionate about it. So I don’t think this man is the culprit. Don’t be fooled twice!”

Right, I won't believe it a second time. I nod, too.

"So you *did* trick me!" Chiba-san yells at Yoshimi-san.

"Eep!" Yoshimi-san, who had moved to the driver's seat, lets out a small scream.

"-You!" After a moment of silence, Chiba-san explodes with rage.

Yoshimi-san is holding a plastic bag from a convenience store to her chest. It seems to contain something the size of a fist. She has a bag from Asahiyama Zoo around her wrist.

"Yoshimi-san?!"

The white Kamuioohashi bridge crosses over the raging Ishikari River to Kamuikotan valley. It's roped off with yellow danger tape and a closure sign during winter. Yoshimi-san pushes her way past and onto the bridge. When Chiba-san chases after her, the bridge starts shaking violently. Kamuioohashi is a suspension bridge.

"If you come any closer, I'll throw it! I don't care if you jump in after it! If you don't want to pour millions of yen down the drain, then stay back!" Yoshimi-san shouts. She's clinging to the guardrail and slipping in the snow.

"Crap…" Chiba-san mutters.

I can understand that he'd be hesitant after hearing it's worth that much. In the end, it's not enough to surpass his anger.

"Stay right there!!" Chiba-san angrily yells as he starts to follow Yoshimi-san.

Sakurako-san and I follow after them. The shaking bridge and the snow make it hard to walk, slowing our pursuit. The violent winds almost sweep me away. Still, we desperately continue on.

"Ugh!"

"Sakurako-san!"

She slips and falls to her knees. I hold my hand out to her, and she grabs on tight. I squeeze her hand, too. No matter what happens, I won't let go of her hand. I have to protect her.

The bridge seems to go on forever, but we eventually make it to the other side. An old station building and steam locomotive come into view. I guess it doesn't go anywhere in winter. I don't see Yoshimi-san anywhere. I can see Chiba-san running toward the

abandoned tunnel. I start running, as well. The inside of the tunnel is cold, and already pitch black.

"Get out here! You can't just keep running forever!" Chiba-san shouts threateningly.

"Please calm down, Chiba-san! This isn't revenge!" I call out, but all I hear back is angry yelling I can't quite make out.

In a situation like this, Yoshimi-san has no choice but to run away. I have to catch Chiba-san somehow… With that thought in mind, I frantically chase after the two of them— but suddenly, we're right in front of the finish line. The tunnel's exit is completely closed off for the winter.

"Ah… Aahh …" A sob of despair escapes from Yoshimi-san's mouth.

"Quit making a fool of me and hand over the head!" Chiba-san roars.

"No! I honestly didn't know! I was tricked, too!" Yoshimi-san tries to argue, but Chiba-san won't listen.

"Please, just calm down a bit! If you do something like this, who will carry on Yuzuki-san's regrets!" I shout as I turn on my phone.

With the light on, I can see Chiba-san pulling on Yoshimi-san's clothes and hair while she desperately claws at the ground, sobbing.

"…Please, just be quiet for a minute and listen to me," I say clearly so everyone can hear. "What are we even doing? None of us… really want to do this. There's two people injured and bleeding in a place like this, in the middle of winter… And here the two of you are, trying to hurt each other even more… It's not right. What we need now is an ambulance and a police car, not a doll's head."

"…So what are you trying to say?" Chiba-san asks, looking dissatisfied.

"It's just that…"

"No, the kid is right. This fight is unnecessary. If there's three heads, we can just split them among three people, right?" Sakurako-san stands in front of me, as if to protect me.

"Hah? Are you stupid? I could just beat up everyone here and take all three, so why should I settle for just one?"

"Well…"

He has a point. But he can't just take Kiyomi-san's doll's head, right?

"Could you at least settle for 2…? One of them was a keepsake from Yoshimi-san's sister. Please return it to her. Then… We can work together to find the real culprit!"

"Shut up! Shut up! Chiba-san yells back.

"Agh!"

He lets go of Yoshimi-san, slamming her into the ground. I hear a painful sound.

"Please stop… I'm begging you!"

Chiba-san ignores my desperate plea. He takes a deep breath, and grabs his baseball bat off the ground. He slowly raises it, aiming at the back of Yoshimi-san's head.

"You can't do this!"

As I try to intervene, Sakurako-san grips my hand tight.

"Stop," she says to both Chiba-san and me.

"Have you ever killed someone, Chiba?" Sakurako-san asks, staring straight at him.

"…What?"

"I asked if you have ever killed someone. Beating a woman to death while she's laying on the ground is a tough burden to bear. Can you do that, even though your hands were shaking after hitting the man from earlier?"

"…I can kill her," he objects in annoyance.

"Can you, though…? Do you understand how unpleasant the sensation of killing another human being is? Really? Can you hit her hard enough to kill her with that bat? Where will you strike? Will you kill us, too? We're witnesses. There's 3 of us in total, or 4 if you include the man in the car. Can you take all of us with just one bat? You'll start to slip on the blood and fat, so you won't be able to hit anyone anymore. Can you stand the scent of blood and guts, and the feeling of breaking bones…?" Sakurako-san says slowly.

Chiba-san gulps.

"Do you get it now? Human beings hate seeing human corpses. I don't mean ethically, either. It's a basic instinct. We find dead people to be horrifying and disgusting. So, will you still kill her?

You're still young. You'll spend the rest of your life dreading the next time you remember that horrible feeling. Even if you try to end your own life, it's harder than you'd think. Can you really endure that?"

"…"

"You'll suddenly remember it when you're laying in bed at night. Every time you smell blood, touch someone's skin, or even if nothing happens at all, the memory of that moment will come back to you. The way her corpse looked, her dilated pupils, her muffled screams - they'll rob you of your peace. Will you waste the rest of your life just to kill this one woman?"

That speech is just what I'd expect from Sakurako-san, who lives in a world without good and evil. Her words hold enough fear and disgust to make you dizzy, but she's also persuasive enough that you can't just cover your ears.

"What were you born for? Stop letting other people run your life. Take the money from selling two of the heads and use it to start over. If you want to study, you can go to university. Or you could get a job. Or you could move to a city far away, where nobody knows you. Those are all things you get to do because you're still alive."

"Ugh…"

His bat clangs to the ground. The sound echoes through the tunnel.

"I…" Chiba-san is just about to say something, when a muffled thud echoes out.

"Y…Yoshimi-san…"

Chiba-san loses all of his strength, and collapses to the ground. Behind him, Yoshimi-san is holding a concrete block that fell off the tunnel wall.